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September 21, 1893.

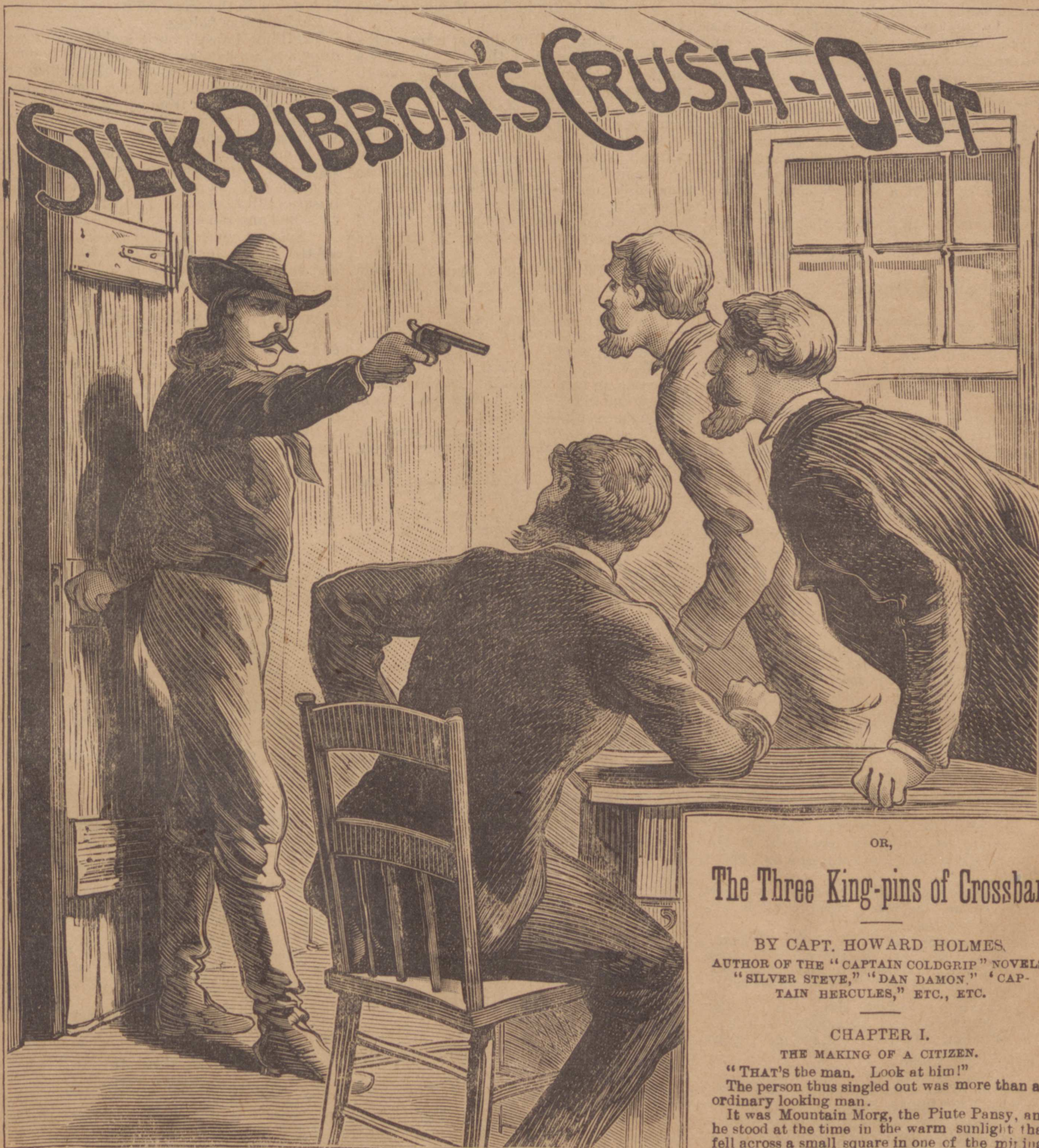
No. 779.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LX.



"I WILL BREAK WITH A BULLET THE POWER OF THE TRIAD, IF ONE OF YOU
MAKES A MOVE TO STOP ME!"

OR,

The Three King-pins of Crossbar.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES.
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"SILVER STEVE," "DAN DAMON," "CAP-
TAIN HERCULES," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAKING OF A CITIZEN.

"THAT'S the man. Look at him!"

The person thus singled out was more than an ordinary looking man.

It was Mountain Morg, the Piute Pansy, and he stood at the time in the warm sunlight that fell across a small square in one of the mining-camps in the heart of the Medicine Bow Hills. He had been a three-days' resident of the place and in that time had conducted himself in a

gentlemanly manner and had not made enemies with any one.

The Piute Pansy was not overly tall, but his figure was perfect and his limbs had the strength of a lion's.

His face was nearly as dark as an Indian's; his hair was long and the back locks were brushed behind the ears, though they did not quite touch his shoulders.

As he stood leaning against the side of one of the shanties of Crossbar he was a prominent sight, and those who saw him wondered what had brought him to camp; but Mountain Morg was one of those who know how to keep their secrets.

When he moved from his place he threw a look around, but did not see the men who had been watching him.

They stood beyond the door of a cabin on the opposite side of the Square and the one who had called his companion's attention to the Piute Pansy clutched his arm and said in a hoarse whisper:

"He's not here to disturb us, eh, brother?"

"What if he were? What can he do?"

"Nothing, of course—nothing, perhaps, beyond giving us some little trouble."

"Don't let that alarm you. A thousand Piute Pansies could not break our grip on things here. I would like to see him try," and the speaker laughed as he turned his head to see Mountain Morg marching down the street to vanish at last among the shadows of some shanties that stood apart from the others.

Mountain Morg heard his name called, and in another moment he had opened a door and was standing just beyond the threshold with his arms folded on his broad chest and his eyes riveted upon a man who lay on a couch in a darkish corner of the room.

"It must be past noon, ain't it?" asked the reclining one.

"It is getting toward the end of day," was the answer.

"How's things outside?"

"Quiet."

"No fussing, Morg?"

"No. Why should there be any? I'm not here for a fight. All I ask is to be allowed to stay till I am ready to get out of town and then they can do as they please."

The figure on the couch was almost boyish in outline, but it was the figure of a man. One hand was carried in a sling and the face was white.

"What are the King-pins doing?"

"Nothing that I can see."

"But you see them occasionally?"

"Yes. While it's pretty hard to tell which is which, I see the three every now and then."

"It's a very funny thing, Morg—that three men should grow up so strangely alike. I never saw anything like it and of course you never did."

"It's freak," said Mountain Morg. "I say it's one of these freaks for which nature is accountable. There they are, three men who are exactly alike. If they were marked in some way so we could tell one from t'other, why, it would be different. Why, Leo could fall in love with a woman and Lionel could court her awhile, and then Leon could step in, and the poor girl would think all along that but one of the three had been making love to her."

The stern face of Mountain Morg relaxed a moment and his gaze wandered to the little window alongside the rough roor of the shanty.

"When do you think you will get out again, Oscar?" he asked, turning to the occupant of the couch.

"To-morrow. I think I will go off then."

"So you're going off, are you? Do you think that the best thing under the circumstances?"

"I guess it's the best, Morg, and I've been lying here these three days trying to size up the situation. It's the best for me I think and also for the girl."

"For Irma you mean, of course."

"For Irma. Yes, it's the best for her and I consult her interests as well my own. She hasn't been here since I've been housed up, but she knows that I am getting along as well as I can and that ought to give her a little pleasure."

Again the eyes of Mountain Morg wander-

ed through the glass into the street and seemed to rest on the shadow climbing up the side of the shanty opposite.

He went to the door, followed by the eyes of the youth on the cot and when he reached the portal and had touched the latch he looked over his shoulder and caught the gaze which had followed him.

"You'll come back, Morg?"

"Mebbe so."

"Mebbe so. Why, I thought you were my friend."

"Well, if you're going off to-morrow what's the use of my coming back? You're not afraid to stay here, Oscar?"

"No. I don't fear the brothers. I haven't reached that point when I must lie here and tremble at the names of the King-pins of Crossbar. I would like to see you again before I slope. I shall walk out of camp in broad daylight; I don't intend to slope between two days like a coward."

There was spirit in the eyes of the speaker and his hand was put forward until it rested on the edge of the couch.

"Will you sell your shares of the Black Rattlesnake?"

"Never! I know what is in that mine. I will sell nothing."

"I thought I would buy, if you wanted to sell."

"You, Morg? What do you want with a lot of mining-stock? I thought you were a rolling stone who never stopped long enough in one place to gather a bit of moss. You want mining stock? By heavens! if I sold to any one I'd sell to you."

The Piute Pansy seemed to smile as he watched the speaker.

"I would like to know how it feels to own something in this world," he said with another grimace. "I've never owned a foot of land above or under ground and I would like to experience the feeling of being a bloated aristocrat."

"Here! I'll give you a chance. I hold fifty shares in Black Rattlesnake. I'll sell you some."

"You don't mean that, Oscar?"

"I mean every word of what I say. How much do you want?"

"What is it worth a share?"

The young man was sitting on the edge of the bed and his good hand drew some papers from underneath the pillow.

"I'll sell you one-half, or one share," he went on. "It makes no difference to you, Morg."

The Piute Pansy looked at the papers and came forward looking at them still.

"One share will suit me just as well as a thousand would," he remarked. "I want to own something in this camp—that's all. I want to be a shareholder, for that will give me citizenship and that's what I want. I want to become a citizen of Crossbar for a purpose," and his lips shut half menacingly behind the last word and he looked again through the glass and saw that the shadow had crept up to the shanty roof.

The youth told the dark-faced man to draw a table to the bed, which was done, and taking pens and ink from a drawer which he unlocked, Oscar transferred five shares of Black Rattlesnake to Mountain Morg.

The Piute Pansy looked on during these proceedings with something akin to eagerness in his eye and when the transfer had been made he leaned forward and laid a ten-dollar gold piece on the table.

"That's the first payment," he said. "It's not much, and if it's not enough, Oscar, why, I'll scrape round and raise the pile."

"It's amply sufficient," was the answer, and Oscar scraped the coin into his pocket.

"You are now a stockholder in a mine and consequently a fellow-citizen."

"That's what I've been wanting for some time. I am now Mountain Morg of Crossbar, whereas a few hours ago I had no interests here."

"That's it."

The Piute Pansy walked out, closing the cabin door behind him. Nothing showed what had happened within the shanty.

In appearance he was as stoical as ever and the hand that brushed back the black hair that tried to straggle into his face was as quiet in demeanor and as soft as a woman's.

This man had a history which was not known to the wild denizens of Crossbar.

They did not know what had brought Mountain Morg to the capital of the Medicine Bow Hills which was dominated over by the three famous brothers called the Three King-pins.

Mountain Morg was a man with a mission, but not the man to proclaim that mission without cause.

He was watched as he moved down-street toward the Plaza or Square which rendered Crossbar so picturesque from the lofty trails in the adjacent mountains.

He passed to the further side of the Square and entered a building a little more pretentious than its neighbors. He passed to an inner room and saw a lot of men drinking along a narrow bar.

His entrance was a signal for looks, for he had not been in Crossbar long enough to escape observation, but without noticing the glances, he ordered a mild drink, after which he turned and left as quietly as he had entered.

Mountain Morg walked from the camp.

His sash of faded red brushed the bushes along the mountain trail as he ascended the elevated path from which at last he could look down on the scene below.

Daylight was fading.

The Piute Pansy looked awhile and then drew a white handkerchief from his bosom.

Tying this to the end of a stick which he cut, he advanced still further, and at last sprung upon a rock from which he could see far across the little valley in the middle of which lay the camp he had just left.

In another moment he had tied the stick to the top of a small tree and springing down from the rock, he ran like a deer through the bushes until he reached another stone where he halted and ran one hand beneath it.

"Not yet, but he will come. He will see the signal for he has eyes like a hawk and they know where to look. I am a citizen of Crossbar! I want him to know what I have accomplished."

Mountain Morg walked slowly back.

He went down the mountain and re-entered Crossbar.

Passing the shanty where he had been made one of the citizens of the gold camp he smiled as if he wondered what Oscar was doing at that hour.

He did not seek the Plaza this time, but turned aside before he gained it and opened the door of another cabin.

"Five shares of Black Rattlesnake! That's what I own," he exclaimed. "They constitute me a citizen of this camp and I have a voice in its government. Now for the rest!"

He might have proceeded if the door had not opened at that very moment.

Mountain Morg turned his head and saw in the doorway between him and the first stars that had come out in the sky a tall figure which appeared like a statue cut out of black marble.

The Piute Pansy looked and instinctively laid one hand on the butt of his revolver.

"You are wanted before the Triad!" said a voice that sunk into his soul like the blade of a knife.

"I am, eh? I am wanted by the Triad? When?"

"Now."

"Where?"

"At the house of the Three King-pins!"

A smile at once came to the stolid face of Mountain Morg.

"I'll be there. Tell them that I will come at once."

The messenger withdrew and Piute Pansy taking one step toward the door said as he shut his dark hands:

"It came a little sooner than I expected, but I am a citizen of Crossbar. Thank Heaven, I played that card before the summons came!"

In another moment the shanty had no tenant.

CHAPTER II.

BEFORE THE TRIAD.

NOBODY seemed to take more than passing notice of the man who had walked through the deepening shades of Crossbar to a house that stood just beyond the Plaza.

It was the home of three men noted beyond the confines of the gold-camp.

They were the King-pins of Crossbar—three brothers who looked alike, tall, handsome men with features that did not stamp them desperate characters, though about them was something that proclaimed them cool and calculating.

They were named Leo, Lionel and Leon and stood shoulder to shoulder in their own interests.

Leo was the younger, Lionel next to him, and Leon, the eldest, was, if anything, the stoutest, but not the handsomest, for all were alike in manly beauty.

Mountain Morg had been summoned to the house of the King-pins; he had been called to meet the Triad, an order known to every one in Crossbar.

It had emanated from the fertile brain of the three brothers, and beyond them but few knew what it meant or what it did.

Mountain Morg reached the door and knocked.

In an instant it was opened and he went in, finding himself in a short hall, at the end of which he found another door.

He had never crossed that step before.

For a minute he stood there wondering if any one would come to conduct him on, when the door at the end of the hall opened and he saw a light.

"Come on," said a voice, and the Piute Pansy advanced.

He entered a room, where he saw the three brothers.

They sat at a table which stood in the middle of the room, and their faces were turned toward the Piute Pansy.

Mountain Morg's figure seemed to increase in stature as he halted there, and looking at the men he took off his hat, showing them his high forehead and wealth of dark hair.

"You sent for me. I am here," was all he said.

"We are glad to see you so punctual," was the answer, though Mountain Morg could not tell from whose particular lips the words had fallen.

He was silent.

"You have been summoned before the Triad to answer a few questions."

"Is this a court?"

"This is the Court of the Triad!" was the quick and stern reply. "This is the only court known here, and you are now before it to reply truthfully to the questions put to you."

Mountain Morg looked at the other brothers and saw that they were regarding him with curious looks.

"What brought you to Crossbar?"

It was a startler at the beginning, and Mountain Morg showed it in his eyes.

"Do I have to answer that?" he queried.

"Remember! You are before the Triad. You have been summoned hither to tell the truth, and if we did not want the truth you would not have been called to this shanty."

"I came to Crossbar as any other man would come. I am a rolling stone. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth—"

"Then your coming here was an accident? Is that it?"

The Piute Pansy made no reply.

"Take the witness," said the questioner, waving his hand to one of the others, as he settled back in his chair.

The second King-pin leaned over the table and rested his hands on the edge of it.

"You have told a lie," he said with the coolness of a desperado, as he met Mountain Morg's gaze. "You are trying to play with us. I can see that. You did not drift to Crossbar. You sought the place by design. You are here for a purpose. You don't own even the tenth part of a share in the poorest mine in camp, and therefore you have no rights which we are bound to respect."

"What constitutes a citizen here?"

"The ownership of stock," was the answer. "No one will sell you a share; therefore you're nothing here."

"I am a citizen of Crossbar!"

The Three King-pins seemed to start, and Mountain Morg watched their change of countenance.

"Show the proof," said one at last. "You a citizen of Crossbar? We want to know that."

Mountain Morg drew from his bosom a bit of paper which he threw upon the table.

It fell in the light and the eyes of the brothers fell upon it at once.

"Five shares in Black Rattlesnake, eh?"

"What does it say?"

"When was this stock sold?"

"To-night."

"By the young man?"

"By one authorized to sell and transfer it."

Mountain Morg, feeling himself master of the situation, was growing a bit haughty and his look told that he was not to be cowed by the Three King-pins of Crossbar.

They handed the paper back and a moment's silence followed.

"Is it valid?" asked the Piute Pansy.

"It is so far as it goes," was the answer.

"It is valid to a certain extent. The young man thought he had a right to transfer you that stock; but," with a smile, "he doesn't own a foot of Black Rattlesnake."

It was Mountain Morg's time to start and he fell back with a look of alarm.

"Doesn't own a foot of Black Rattlesnake?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Just what we say. Oscar owns nothing. He is as poor as the lizards that bake themselves daily in the sun on the rocks. He sold you that stock, did he?—five shares of Black Rattlesnake? What did you pay down, Mountain Morg?"

The man before the Triad seemed thunder-struck. He looked first at one of the three and then at the other. It was a puzzle which, as it had not been explained, he could not solve.

"You don't own a foot of the mine. No! a share of its stock is yours—we don't care what that paper says. Oscar had no right to sell you a share though he may have thought he had."

"How did you get hold of it?"

There was another singular look in the eyes of the King-pins and Mountain Morg felt his hand wandering to his hip as he expected he was about to have trouble with the rulers of Crossbar.

"Never mind that. We hold every share of Black Rattlesnake."

"Then you got hold of it by some legerdemain. You swindled the boy out of it while he nursed his wounded wrist, and by some infernal hocus-pocus you got your hands on the mine and are now trying to unmake a citizen of Crossbar."

The half-Indian stepped back and faced the men at the table.

"I don't want trouble and I won't bring any on," he continued. "I am here to remain as long as I please, which may not sound very pleasant in your ears. I am Mountain Morg, sometimes called the Piute Pansy, and I am as harmless as a dove when everything suits me and a little cross when things go awry."

"Then, the sooner you cool down the better for the Pansy family," said the man at the west end of the table. "You are now in Crossbar, entitled to no rights, because you are not a citizen. You own nothing here. You may have thought that you were a citizen because a young pauper transferred to you a lot of stock which he did not own; but you must understand that we have the confirming of citizenship in this camp and that the papers must pass through the hands of the Triad."

"If that is true—if I am no citizen of Crossbar, then I will retire. Good-night, gentlemen."

One of the dark hands of Mountain Morg reached out and touched the door.

As he pulled it open the three brothers attempted to rise, but the succeeding instant the six-shooter which had leaped from the mountaineer's pocket covered them and behind it gleamed the mad eyes of the Piute Pansy.

"I seek no battle. I am not here to kill, but to remain silent. I am no man of war, but I will not run."

They looked down over the barrel of the leveled weapon into the dark, immobile face of the man from nowhere.

"As I live, I will break with a bullet the power of the Triad if one of you make a move to stop me! I am a dead shot, having killed before when cornered. You may rule this camp with a heavy hand and may run the Triad to suit yourselves, but I will assert my rights, and I believe, no matter what you have said, that I am a citizen of Crossbar, entitled to all the rights that fall to a person of that sort. You will find me here till I take a notion to leave. I may stay

longer than you desire, but you shall not drive from this camp Mountain Morg, the Piute Pansy!"

He stepped into the hallway; he advanced to the outer door, his handsome figure a target for three revolvers which were but half drawn, and as he passed from the house he looked down the corridor and in the light that revealed the further chamber, saw the Three King-pins standing like statues at the table where he had left them.

All this had not taken up ten minutes.

With almost noiseless tread Mountain Morg went down the street toward the cabins.

Once he looked up at the mountains that frowned above the camp and seemed to see something there, for his face relaxed for a second; but he tramped on and at last reached the door of Oscar's hut.

As he threw it open a girlish figure drew back with a feminine cry and stopped in the middle of the room, with wide-open eyes staring at the Piute Pansy.

"Do you know what they say?" said Mountain Morg, throwing himself across the threshold and facing a young man whose arm was being dressed by the girl he had disturbed.

"Do I know what who says?"

"The King-pins of Crossbar—the Triad of the mountain?"

"What, have you come from them?"

"I have. I was summoned to their presence, and they wanted to ply me with certain questions. I told them they dared not question me, because I was a citizen of Crossbar."

"That settled it, didn't it?" asked the youth. "Wasn't that enough to seal their mouths?"

"By no means. They said I was not a citizen—that I didn't own a single share of stock—"

"But I transferred you five shares of Black Rattlesnake! That makes you a citizen with all the rights that belong to citizenship in this region."

"They denied it. They claim to own every share of Black Rattlesnake themselves."

"The Three King-pins?"

"Yes."

"It is false! It is a lie! I own the fifty shares. I hold them by purchase, and they know it. Where are those men?"

The youth was on his feet, but with a quick cry the girl sprang forward and forced him back.

"No, no! You must not confront the Triad of Crossbar now. You are not strong enough, and, besides, you are going off—you have promised me to go and leave them for a spell."

"I will not go now, Irma. I will face these vultures who have the cheek to say that I own no stock here. They are playing a game so deep that they must fail. They have lorded it over Crossbar long enough, and there must be a deliverance."

"But you can deliver nothing. You shall not meet them now. I say you shall not."

In an instant she placed her figure between the youth and the door. Her eyes blazed with resolution and her bosom heaved with excitement.

Mountain Morg looked on a moment, and then struck the table with his fist.

"Wait!" he said. "Wait till Silk Ribbon plays his hand."

"And who is Silk Ribbon?" asked Irma.

The only reply was a puzzling look.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY.

IRMA'S look at Mountain Morg was a puzzling one, for she did not understand the rolling stone.

As he did not appear eager to enlighten her, she resolved not to question him, for she felt that he was not the man to stand quizzing, and so she contented herself with looking into the depths of his gray eyes while he glanced from the window with the smile which had stolen to his face lingering there like a ray of light.

Who was Silk Ribbon?

Irma asked herself this question because she had never heard the name before.

She had lived for three years in Crossbar, sharing with its strange people the excitements of the mountain camp, and in all that

time the name the Pansy had uttered had never assailed her ears.

After awhile she went over to where Oscar stood and silently took his hand.

"Promise me again that you will not resent the bite of the Three King-pins!" she said. "Say to me that you will go away, if you are going, without crossing the path they have marked out."

He looked down into the appealing eyes, but said nothing.

"You will promise me, won't you?"

"I will, Irma! I will not see these men—not to-night."

Irma saw that he would go no further, and falling back with a farewell pressure and another look at Mountain Morg she passed from the shanty and was gone.

"She's a belle," said the Piute Pansy, looking after Irma's retreating form. "Where does she belong?"

"Here."

"But I don't mean that. I mean whar did she come from?"

"From the South—from Colorado."

"Was she born there?"

"I never asked her."

"Never asked her, and yet you have made love to the girl gracious knows how long!"

A deep flush suffused the youth's face and he turned away to conceal it.

"It's all right. I've had a romance myself."

"You, Mountain Morg?"

"Why not? Ain't I human?"

"Of course, but—"

"But because I'm half Injun and have a fashion of running round the world, I ain't good enough for a woman? I guess you're about right, Oscar, but I'll go too."

At the door, however, the Pansy stopped and looked back at the young man.

"Keep your pledge to Irma, no matter what comes," said he. "I may not be a citizen. The King-pins may own all of the mine and may have told the truth."

"Didn't I sell you five shares of Black Rattlesnake?"

"Yes—"

"The stock was mine to sell, I don't care what the Three King-pins say. I sold you what belonged to me and I propose to stand by my rights."

"But your pledge to the girl. On no account must that be broken. Stand by that, boy. When Silk Ribbon comes, as come he will—"

"In the name of thunder, who is Silk Ribbon?"

Again the lips of Mountain Morg met beneath the mustache that covered them and the door opened and shut.

Oscar was alone.

"This outrage is simply infamous and Irma has tied my hands," he exclaimed.

"The three brothers who have ruled Crossbar with a rod of iron think they can win every play they make. Mountain Morg is the foil to their acts, but without helpers here he will fail. What does he mean to do in Crossbar? What brought the Piute Pansy to camp at this juncture? Something is afoot. Who knows that Morg is not as cool a desperado as the Three King-pins? And in the name of wonder who is Silk Ribbon and when will he come?"

Having resolved to quit camp the following day, not between days as a thief or criminal would, Oscar, who had drifted to Crossbar nearly a year prior to the opening of our romance, prepared for the flight.

He had for some time witnessed the encroachments of the Three King-pins. He knew that they were gradually getting everything in their own hands and felt that, unless checked, the time would come when they would own the whole camp in fee simple.

Behind those men was a life into which no person could look.

Nobody knew who they were or from whence they came. Some professed to say that they were not brothers, but men who, looking alike, had been thrown together by the force of circumstances, but there was no proof of this.

Men drift into a common center and become friends and allies.

They fall in with one another on the highway of crime and rule for each other, no matter what the stakes may be. It might have been thus in Crossbar; the gold camp

may have fallen under the domain of three brothers, or it may have drifted thither with nothing to check the movement.

Leo, Lionel and Leon, the Three King-pins, were the masters of the situation when Mountain Morg entered the place, but they had incurred the dislike of more than one inhabitant and their code of laws had been obeyed to the letter while some of those who obeyed it cursed its framers.

Mountain Morg went back to the shanty he inhabited.

His life of three days in Crossbar had made him but few acquaintances. He had mingled somewhat with the people at the dens that dotted the camp, but he had made no enemies.

Men seemed to regard him as a new-comer who, like others, would pass on and seek other camps where the tables in the gaming-dens had empty chairs, and where he could play with the tiger's claws until scratched.

"I wonder if he saw the handkerchief?" thought Mountain Morg, his thoughts recurring to the white signal he had left on the mountain. "He might come in to-night and he might postpone his visit. When he comes the game will open and there will be a play which the King-pins may not fancy. I can't get the girl out of my head, try as I do. Oscar, as he is called, knows nothing about her, only that she came from Colorado, and that's not very much. She might have come from there and been elsewhere before. If I thought she was old Hannan's child, hang me if I wouldn't make a play to-night and before I went to sleep. It is funny how I get such things in my head, but there she is again. I can't help thinking of Irma."

It was midnight when a man stole with the tread of a fox from Mountain Morg's shanty and went down the narrow street with cabins on either hand.

He stopped across the street from one of the dens and looked into it from that coign of vantage. He saw the lights that made the room visible in every corner, and then made out one by one the men who gambled there.

"What are you looking at?"

The Pansy turned like a person stung by a serpent and, drawing back, caught a glimpse of a man who had come up without sound.

"Jehosaphat! when did you come up?" he cried.

"You hadn't your ears at work else you might have heard me. I didn't try to steal upon you, but I thought you were listening to something else."

"I was. I was listening to the galoots in there."

"They are thick, as I can see. What place is that?"

"It's the Green Paradise—kept by Lizard Pete."

"Paradise with a lizard in it, ha! ha! that's good," laughed the other as Mountain Morg turned his head again and for another moment studied the interior of the place across the way.

"Why aren't you looking for the murderer?"

"For what?—for the murderer?" exclaimed Mountain Morg.

"That's what I said and that's what I mean. Come! Where have you been? I want to show you what I have discovered within the last ten minutes."

"A crime?"

"Come and see."

The speaker, who was as tall as Mountain Morg and apparently a stranger, led the way back over the ground the Piute Pansy had traversed, and when near a certain cross-street or trail he stopped and pointed toward the nearest shanty.

"They kill women in this camp," he said with his eyes fastened on Mountain Morg.

"You're mad!" cried the Pansy. "There's no dead woman in this camp. I left Irma a short time ago and no one would want to kill her. I don't believe you're telling the truth. There's some trickery here."

"Open the door of that shanty and see."

Mountain Morg with another look at the man turned away and approached the designated cabin and reached the door.

He saw by the starlight that it stood slightly ajar and with a backward glance at the stranger, he put out his hand and touched it.

"A dead woman in there? I don't believe such nonsense. It is a trick—one of the plays by the Three King-pins and I am to be the victim. See here," he went on, turning back. "I don't intend to be duped. I won't go and look."

"Just as you please. I wanted to show you something—that a crime has been committed in this camp within the last few hours. The dead one lies beyond the door of that shanty. I would like to see if you know her."

"Is she young?"

The stranger laughed.

"By the dukedom I inhabit! this is too bad. What are you afraid of, man? Don't they call you Mountain Morg?"

"They do."

"Why, you have a reputation for coolness second to none. They tell some great stories about you, how you can fight and play a cool hand when one is necessary and all that, yet there you stand, afraid to look into a cabin where the hands beyond the door could not harm a child."

"By thunder; I'll go and see and if you have played me false I will settle with you hereafter."

"I will be here when you want to settle."

The Pansy went forward for the third time and threw wide the door of the shanty.

All was dark inside. He looked, but saw nothing, and the starlight wasn't brilliant enough to penetrate beyond the threshold far enough to let him solve the secret of the shanty.

"Try a match if you have one," said the stranger.

Mountain Morg found a bit of match in one pocket and struck it across the logs.

As the flame leaped up he leaned forward and held the match above his head.

In an instant he uttered a cry and his eyes seemed to start from his head.

On the floor lay at full length the body of a woman.

The face was upturned toward the uncouth ceiling and one of the hands was clinched and cut.

"Go forward and look at her."

The Pansy did so. He advanced and stooped over the body.

His dark hand held the match close to the face and he saw the clean-cut Grecian features and the well-formed body at his feet.

The victim of the assassin was not past thirty-five. She wore a close-fitting dress which was dragged at the skirts as if she had been on the mountain trails, and on one of the hands was a ring with a dark but shining setting.

"Who is she?" cried Mountain Morg, wheeling toward the door as his match went out and he threw the remains to the floor.

"In heaven's name! who is this creature?"

There was no reply.

"You ought to know something about this death else you would not have brought me to where the victim lay. You know who took this woman's life and I demand—"

The man stopped.

"Jehosaphat! he's not here," he exclaimed. "The man who brought me to the victim of murder has sloped."

It was true. Look where he would his keen eyes could not see a sign of the man who had guided him to what was to become the great mystery of Crossbar and give to the world a romance of dark scenes and cunning men.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KING-PINS SHOW THEIR HAND.

THE Piute Pansy stood like one spell-bound before the cabin of the dead.

The silence was oppressive and nothing broke it for some time and then only the lonesome hoot of an owl on the mountain.

Mountain Morg waited and looked for the man who had brought him to the scene but he was not rewarded for his pains; the man did not come back, and by and by the rolling stone went again toward the shanty.

When he entered it he closed the door and then struck another light.

This time he shaded the flame with his hat and stooped over the ghastly face on the floor. He looked at things he had not seen before.

He took one of the hands in his and examined it. He looked for a wound and found

it at last, a deep but bloodless one in the back, showing that a dagger had fallen unexpectedly and taken the life of the tenant of the shanty.

All at once Mountain Morg was startled by a cry and springing up almost dropping his match he was confronted by the white and ghastly face of Irma.

"My God! who told *you* this was here?" cried the man, pointing at the dead woman at his feet.

Irma came forward trembling, but with something in her hand.

"This was thrust underneath my door," she said, holding out a bit of paper which captured the rolling stone's gaze. "It was sent to me by some hocus-pocus and I am here by its command."

"Let me see it, girl?"

Mountain Morg took the paper and held it close to his little light.

"Go to the tenth cabin from the end of the street and see an old acquaintance. You will find there some one whom you have seen before. When you have seen what is there you will know what to do."

This is what the starting eyes of Mountain Morg read in the light of his matches.

Irma looking on while he perused the lines said nothing until he reached the end.

"Well, go and look at her," he said.

The girl stole forward and the Pansy held the light so she could see the white face of the dead.

For a full minute she looked and slowly raised her eyes to Mountain Morg's face.

"All is mystery to me," she remarked.

"As it is to me," was the answer.

"I never saw this victim before."

"Neither did I."

They stood face to face mystified, but the Piute Pansy spoke first.

"This woman came to camp and was killed. I was guided to this shanty by one who knew she was here."

"Tell me all."

Mountain Morg did this and Irma listened intently.

"This is the beginning of dark work," said the girl, rousing herself. "It is the beginning of more mystery than we shall ever see solved. Don't you think now is the time for Silk Ribbon to come?"

"He will come! By heaven! if he knew of this he would hasten. He may be nearer than we think. You started when I mentioned him, but you will start when you see the person. I can't tell you more now. Here is work for us. Shall we sound the alarm? Shall we tell Crossbar that in the tenth shanty lies dead an unknown woman murdered by a mysterious hand?"

Irma seemed to shrink from the task, but the hand of Mountain Morg grasped her wrist.

"Let them find it out. What say you?" he grinned. "Let them find out for themselves, I say. They will do it. The sun won't be very high ere they discover this murder. Some prowler will discover her and then—"

"That is better. We will let Crossbar tell itself," put in Irma. "I will keep the secret and if the person who guided you to the shanty cares to break the news to Crossbar, why, let him break it."

Mountain Morg and the girl stole silently from the cabin. They went down the still streets of Crossbar with the dread thing behind them, and the girl, whose face had no color, could not help wondering who the victim was and why she had died in the camp.

She shut behind her carefully the door of the cabin she called home.

Midnight had come and gone, and she had no desire to sleep.

She counted the moments as they flew by between that hour and the distant dawn. With her brain on fire, as it were, she waited for the first flushes of light, and when they came over the mountain and gilded the rough roofs of Crossbar, she ventured to the window and looked toward the shanty where the mystery was as if she expected to see the door open and the dead come forth, touched by a hand that could restore the flitted spirit.

But such a miracle was not performed, and Irma watched the cabin, seeing the sun come up and the beams fall all around.

Suddenly the door of another shanty opened, and with a cry which rose involuntarily to her lips, she saw Oscar come forth.

The boy was keeping his promise. He was going away from the camp where he had been shot through the wrist after dark like a wolf. He was turning his back upon the men of Crossbar and upon the three brothers as well, and as she watched him and saw him advance toward the Plaza, she wondered if his going would be interrupted.

The young man—he was barely twenty, with a fine physique and an open countenance—cast a glance toward her home as if he would see her ere he departed, and Irma was starting toward the door when she stopped.

"I will not see him. It would not do at this hour. It might cause him to change his mind, and he shall go away without knowing aught of the crime of last night."

Oscar gained the Plaza where, looking at the Green Paradise whose earliest customers stood in front of it, he seemed to stop as if he would speak to them.

All at once a man whose body Irma recognized on sight came from the place and confronted the youth.

"Which way that, boy?"

Irma, holding the door open, heard the gruff demand and saw the livid face of the man who had spoken.

"I am going away," said the youth, looking squarely at the speaker. "I guess one who is not a citizen of Crossbar can leave when he pleases."

"It's a challenge," said Irma, gasping. "He says himself he is not a citizen, yet last night he said the shares he sold Mountain Morg belonged to him."

"You can't go without a passport. You know that."

Oscar went toward the Green Paradise and stopped directly in front of it and its motley crowd.

"Without a passport?" Irma heard him say in a manner which told her that he spoke through clinched teeth. "I own no authority here, and, being no citizen by your own words spoken last night to Mountain Morg, I need no passport to quit this camp."

Breathless and doubly pale stood the creature who listened to these words.

The crowd at the den parted and there stepped forth to array themselves alongside the person who had addressed Oscar, two more men who were his counterpart in every particular.

They were the Three King-pins of Crossbar.

With the sunlight in their faces and among the hairs of their soft blonde beards, they looked like superior beings, and those who saw them felt that they were more than ordinary mortals.

These were the men whose hands ruled with rods of iron or cords of silk, as suited best their purposes. They were men who could show no mercy and who had determined to run things to suit themselves or not have them run at all.

A crisis was at hand.

Oscar determined to quit the camp, but with his mind made up to keep his promise with Irma that he would not provoke a fight with the Three King-pins, he saw that he was in sore straits.

Alone before the men of Crossbar—almost powerless, though armed and with a shattered wrist—he faced the peril which seemed about to overwhelm him.

"You can't go!" continued the one who had spoken first. "We forbid your advancing another step. Turn and go back!"

Oscar looked once more at the enemy and felt his blood grow hot in his young veins.

"You know where your shanty is. You go back and wait for orders."

"You have no right to interfere. I know the code to which you adhere. No one not a citizen of Crossbar can be held in durance here. You have said that I am a mountain pauper and that when I sold to Mountain Morg the five shares of Black Rattlesnake I did not own one. That makes me nothing here. I am not a citizen and therefore have a right to quit this camp unquestioned."

The hand of the King-pin pointed toward the youth's cabin, but the lips did not move.

Oscar saw the figures of the three touching shoulders as they stood in the sun and

wondered what would happen if he should disobey and push on.

"If you command there is nothing left me but obedience," he said at last. "You must hold yourselves responsible for what follows my action. I go back, but I may fight for what I believe are my rights. I may see to whom the Black Rattlesnake belongs."

"Then go back and fight!" was the answer.

Oscar turned and came toward Irma's cabin.

"Merciful heavens! they would not let him go!" cried the girl, seeing the outcome of the confrontation. "They have him in the net and now they will play the hand they hold."

He came on, walking erect with the tread of a young conqueror, while with her face apparently whiter than ever, she watched him until he closed the door of his cabin behind him.

The next moment there stepped into view a man whose figure had within the last three days become a familiar sight to Irma.

The Piute Pansy walked to the spot vacated by Oscar and faced the Three King-pins of Crossbar.

"You can browbeat the living, but why don't you attend to the dead?" his voice rung out.

"He is telling them—that man is, and yet he said we would let Crossbar find out for itself," muttered Irma. "He is telling them that a dead woman occupies a shanty in the camp and they will flock to the spot. What is he saying now?"

She opened the door still further and leaned out till the warm light touched her face.

"Take that man!" suddenly cried one of the Three King-pins. "Arrest him, men of Crossbar. The Triad orders that he be seized at once."

Mountain Morg fell back, but straightened as he stopped and with one of his dark hands at his hip, he even smiled as he looked at the crowd which seemed willing to advance, but which did not like to make the arrest.

"That man's hands are red with blood!" continued Leo of the King pins as he covered Mountain Morg with his hand. "The Triad accuses him. He found his victim last night. She lies in the tenth cabin from the end of the street. Go and see for yourselves, but first close in on the red hand."

Irma uttered a shriek she could no longer suppress, and Mountain Morg, whiter by a mite than before, with his revolver half drawn, stood on the Plaza and glared at the gang.

"Come! By George! I will lead you myself," he cried. "Yes, I will show you the victim of last night's murder. I never saw her before I looked into her dead face. If I killed her, I will knot the rope for my own neck; but whoever did take the life shall some day pay for the deed!"

The crowd came forward. Mountain Morg put up the revolver and was waiting the foremost ones when some one shouted that a new-comer had arrived.

In another instant all eyes were looking across the Plaza and toward the southern limits of Crossbar to see riding forward on a horse which showed signs of travel a man who commanded the attention of every one.

"The secret keeper of Medicine Bow!—the man who guided me to the dead!" murmured Mountain Morg.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE MESHES.

He who regarded the new-comer with the most curiosity was Mountain Morg.

There was no doubt in the mind of the Piute Pansy that he was the person who had guided him to the dead body of the unknown woman in the tenth cabin. He had remembered the man, having had a fairly good look at him in the light of his match, and now he saw that the same one had come back.

Mountain Morg watched the stranger as he came on looking at the crowd with considerable interest, and when he drew up in front of the gang he seemed to lean forward in his saddle and inspect them all.

There was something singularly attractive about this personage.

He was taller than the Pansy and his eye was sharp and penetrating.

"Well, gentlemen, how goes it?" he asked, surveying the crowd. "I see you're up with the sun like fighting cocks and that's something in Crossbar's favor."

"Great Jehosaphat!" secretly cried the Piute Pansy. "Where did he git that mask?"

Presently the Three King-pins came forward and one of them walked to where the stranger sat his horse and looked up into his face.

"We were just going to look at a dead woman in one of the shanties. Will you go along?"

"A dead woman, eh? It's a queer place for a woman to be ain't it?"

"Rather," remarked, Leo, with a quick glance at Mountain Morg. "The fact is she's been killed and we're going to see what the matter was."

Mountain Morg said nothing. He was gazing at the man who had invaded the camp, and upon whom nearly every eye was fixed.

"I'll go, certainly," said the stranger. "By the way, my name is Sol—Sol Solstice, and I hail last from Grizzly Bar. I've been on the road for some time looking for a place to locate, as I'm not a beggar, and money is no object to one who has no relatives and who struck it fairly rich a year back. You've got a good spot here—I ruther like it. Protected from the wind, and good water and whisky."

An audible smile went through the crowd and the men of Crossbar looked at one another and seemed pleased with the compliment.

But side by side some distance from the speaker stood Lionel and Leon, their elbows touching, while Leo the younger stood closer, his eagle-like eyes riveted on the man from Grizzly Bar with something more than a passing curiosity.

The procession started for the tenth shanty, Mountain Morg among the foremost, for the accusation had made him a marked man.

The Three King-pins walked together, their splendid figures seen by all and their faces painfully white as they seemed to be laboring under suppressed excitement.

The door of the fatal cabin stood ajar.

A ray of sunlight lay across the threshold and when the hand of Leon pushed the portal open the whole interior was flooded and a dozen bronzed men craned their necks to see what was inside.

"She's thar yet," said Leon, drawing back and looking at the crowd. "The woman, sir, is inside and you can have a look at her."

Sol Solstice leaned forward and then went to the door.

All saw him look inside and remain there a moment during which time his face showed nothing, while his eyes were fastened on the figure still stretched on the floor as Mountain Morg had seen it last.

The man from Grizzly turned back at last and looked up at the Three King-pins.

"I see," said he. "Do you tell me that she's been murdered?"

"She has been killed—killed in the night."

"When did she come to Crossbar?"

The three men shook their heads at once.

"You don't know, eh? Then, she was a stranger here."

"A stranger," said the three brothers.

Sol Solstice turned toward the cabin once more and again looked in upon the dead.

"It's kind o' queer," he remarked. "I never saw a case just like this. You don't know her at all?"

A slight start by the Three King-pins, a start which Mountain Morg did not let escape his eye, followed the query and Leo stepped forward.

"The woman is a mystery," he said, addressing the crowd, but more particularly Sol Solstice. "That is, she is a mystery for being killed in this camp."

"It seems to me some one ought to find the trail. A woman hardly ever loses her identity entirely. There ought to be a clue."

The Three King-pins shook their heads again in unison.

"There is a clue," said a voice, and all looked at Mountain Morg who had spoken

without moving from where he had halted. "I have been accused of taking that creature's life. I have been accused of coming to her with the dagger of death in my hand and killing her in yon shanty. It is hardly worth while for me to deny the accusation, but before heaven! I never saw her until last night."

"Until last night?" echoed Leon, a smile lurking in the blonde beard and at the corners of his mouth. "You saw her then, eh?"

"I saw her as she is now—dead!"

"In that shanty?"

"Right where she is."

The Piute Pansy looked at Sol Solstice, but said nothing.

"I saw that woman last night, I repeat, and where she lies now. I held a match over her face and discovered that life was extinct and that she had a dagger wound in back."

"But you kept still?"

"It was not my business to say anything. I knew it would be discovered by Crossbar, and, besides, I am no citizen here, although I thought for a time I was."

He referred to his interview with the Three King-pins at the house of the Triad and a murmur of amazement went through the crowd.

"We have accused that man," cried Leon.

"We accuse him now of taking the life of the victim of murder. It is the first cold-blooded murder we have had in Crossbar for a year. That man is a man of cool deeds. He calls himself Mountain Morg, but he has had other names. Two years ago more than seven hundred miles from here he was branded and whipped out of camp for a crime that shocked the whole district, hard as it was. That man has been all over the land. He is a veritable Wandering Jew, condemned, no doubt, to walk the mountain trails until the end comes."

White as a sheet and with lips welded and hands that quivered while they were clinched, stood the object of these remarks before the crowd of desperadoes.

He looked them over and then turned his gaze upon the Three King-pins while he seemed to draw his figure up with an effort.

"It is true. I never thought to tell anything about myself in this camp, but part of that is true. I was driven out of camp. I was whipped by the Vigilantes. I was hunted for a crime which shocked the whole region, but in the sight of heaven and with uplifted hand I swear before you all that I was innocent."

He stood before them with uplifted hand, and his eyes riveted for a moment on a fleecy cloud which swept across the face of the sky.

"It was a put-up job on the Piute Pansy. I never stained my hands with the blood of the man killed that December night in his palace. I never crossed the threshold of that palace, nor saw him after he was dead. If I was guilty, why was I not hanged instead of being lashed at the tail of a burro? Let the man who engineered that disgraceful proceeding tell the truth. Let those who set the camp against me come forward and tell what is true. I have been an outcast since that hour. They made me a rolling stone, condemned to flit from pillar to post with a stain on my soul, when, in fact, I never committed the crime which, as has been said, set the whole district on edge and caused me to be tracked from mountain to mountain like a wounded wolf. Some within the sound of my voice know that I was innocent. Some who hear me now know that the Monte Cristo of Maldemar died not by my hand, but by the hand of another."

All listened spellbound to the words of the Piute Pansy, who stood slightly apart from them, with one foot resting on the step which led to the cabin of the dead.

"You were here last night? You have admitted that?" said Leon.

"I was here. I saw this woman dead as she is now."

"Yet you did not sound the alarm."

"I did not have to. It was not my crime nor my camp. I am a stranger here."

"Who else saw you?"

Mountain Morg thought of Irma; he thought, too, of the mysterious letter which had drawn the girl to the tenth cabin, but he said nothing.

"I won't get Irma into the mess," he said to himself. "I will fight it out single-handed, unless the man who came back awhile ago comes to my rescue. He is the person who guided me to the shanty and showed me the corpse yonder. But he keeps still. What is the game this man is playing?"

"This man shall have a trial," said Leon. "He must answer before the Triad. The charge is murder. Arrest him!"

For half a second Mountain Morg appeared about to resist arrest, but all at once, taking his hands from the revolvers where they rested, he offered himself for arrest, and in a moment he was in the hands of the men of Crossbar.

At that instant his eyes met those of Sol Solstice.

There was a cold look in the depths of the stranger's orbs, and the Piute Pansy became more mystified than ever.

"He knows he led me to this shanty. He knows he showed me the dead woman and got me into this pickle, but he keeps his tongue, and never so much as comes to my relief. Wait! I will unmask him yet. I will show this unknown enemy of mine that Mountain Morg is not altogether harmless, though in the grip of the merciless pards of Crossbar."

They marched him off. In a small room in one of the double cabins of the gold-camp stood the Pansy, reflecting on the sudden change in his fortunes, and wondering what would happen next.

He heard, outside, the voices of those by whom he was guarded, and now and then caught sight of a stalwart figure as it passed his window with the regularity of a sentry.

He went to the window, at last, and looked out.

The Plaza was before him, and just beyond, the House of the Triad.

He watched the latter for some time, and now and then saw a man come out and walk away.

"It grows deeper, this mystery does," he muttered. "Here I am cooped up, accused of killing a woman whom I had never seen. I saw her last night for the first time, and she was dead then. I saw the cut hands and the wound in the back. I saw the man who led me to her come back with the coolness of Satan, and when he could have saved me by a word, he remained silent as the Sphinx. He wants my blood, and why? Who is this man that he should deliberately throw me into the very shades of death? And if he wanted me to die, why take this course? Why kill a woman for the purpose of having me put out of his way? Was this murder necessary? I wish Silk Ribbon Sam would show up."

It was a wish not likely to be fulfilled, for the hours crept over Mountain Morg's head, and he saw the sun go down the western slope of the sky.

It was a hot afternoon and the leaves seemed to wither in the scorching beams of the unclouded sun.

The Piute Pansy, roasting in the close shanty, leaned against the wall near the window and tried to drink in the few breaths of air which now and then reached him.

He was suffocating.

Presently he started up and looked across the Plaza. A man he had not seen before was standing in the shadow of the Green Paradise.

He must have come out of the establishment, whose floors had been soaked with water for coolness, and as he stood in full view with his shirt unbuttoned and his well-made figure well seen, he became a target for the Pansy's eyes.

"In God's name! when did he come?" cried Mountain Morg, almost leaping to the door, forgetful that he was a prisoner virtually condemned.

The man in front of the Green Paradise lighted a cigar and turned to the open door as another person came out.

"He is already playing one of his cool hands," Morg went on. "Everything—my life and liberty in the bargain—is in his keeping, and there he goes—walking away with one of the Three King-pins!"

His eyes followed them and as they vanished beyond the door of the House of the Triad he exclaimed:

"If you fail, Silk Ribbon, I am gone."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CRUCIAL TEST.

THE person so suddenly discovered by Mountain Morg from the window of his prison had come to Crossbar with the same quietness which had distinguished Sol Solstice's arrival.

He had come without being heralded and the first intimation of his presence was his entrance into the Green Paradise to be confronted by the promiscuous crowd to be found there all the time.

If he was the long-looked-for Silk Ribbon he had come at last.

As he entered the house occupied by the Three King-pins he looked about him and was led to the room at the end of the corridor.

Leon was the one who conducted him thither and when the door had been shut and Silk Ribbon had found a chair at the table, he turned and seemed to study his conductor.

"You have reached Crossbar at a stirring time," said the blonde King-pin. "We are in the midst of exciting events. A strange crime has been committed—strange because the victim is a woman. We have had a murder in camp and so late as last night."

The listener said nothing until the last word had left the speaker's lips.

Then he looked across the table and merely crossed his legs.

"Murders are not uncommon events in camps like Crossbar. Women, however, are scarcer."

"You are right. The fair sex are few and far between. But we have one with us besides the woman who lies dead where she was discovered. We can get along without beauty here and are willing to let the other camps have more than their share."

"Who killed this person?"

Leon, the King-pin, looked at his companion.

"We have accused a man named Mountain Morg—half Indian and half tiger."

"What is the proof?"

"More than the man thinks."

Leon grinned.

"He has not been tried yet?"

"Not yet, but we will soon bring him before the bar and let him make the fight for life."

"Ah, you are going to give him a chance, are you?"

"We are. It wouldn't be right to let the poor rascal swing without it, you know. But this man can't escape."

"He is guilty, then?"

"He is guilty."

"Why should he want to kill the woman?"

"That is as yet a mystery to the court, but everything will come out before the rope tightens on his neck. Men have motives when they go to murder. They know what they are doing. Why, this man—this fellow—tried first to become a citizen of Crossbar; he purchased a few shares of stock and when summoned to our presence boasted of his supposed citizenship until he discovered that what he had was worthless and that he was no more a citizen of Crossbar than of Hong Kong. It was laughable to see the look that came to his face when he found this out. He never owned a share of mining-stock in this camp and he never will."

"Not if you hang him," said Silk Ribbon.

The brown hand of Leon came up over the edge of the table and rested there.

"We will hang this man!" said he. "There is, as I have said, no escape for him."

"But the murdered woman?—has she been identified?"

"We know who she was. She did not come to Crossbar without the means of identification upon her person."

"Oh, she came in lately."

"Last night."

"And was killed then?"

"She was killed then," was the echo. "She didn't get to see any one but the man who took her life. He may have been watching for her like a tiger. At any rate, she was seen and followed to the shanty or decoyed there and was killed. It's all one. The hand that took that life will suffer for the deed!"

For a moment the man who was listen-

ing to all this said nothing, but looked at the print on the wall above Leon's head.

"I am glad you have come," continued the King-pin. "I haven't seen one of the old captain's band for years and your letter is all right."

Leon took from his pocket a paper which he opened while he spoke. It was a letter, short and strangely written, for it was signed not with a name nor with letters, but with singular-looking characters strongly suggestive of secrecy.

He spread it out before him and then held it between him and the light.

"This letter makes you solid here," he went on. "It makes you as solid in Crossbar as we are ourselves. The old captain—sorry to hear of his affliction—has our best wishes. Times are out of joint down there he says."

"A little," smiled the man across the table. "We can't live in clover all the time. The soldiers give us a good deal of trouble. These are not the days you used to have?"

Leon's eyes flashed as if in memory of other times.

"Those were times and no mistake," he exclaimed. "We were living then, but now and here we manage to get along after a fashion."

"But you make money."

"Money? I'll show you."

The King-pin arose and crossed the room. In another moment he had stooped and opened a door in the floor.

"We don't have all our wealth in money. We are too far from the mints, but some day we'll open the assayers' eyes! Just to give you a sample of what we have on hand, come along."

Leon having first locked the door of the room led Silk Ribbon down a flight of steps that seemed to seek the bowels of the earth, and when they struck solid ground they found themselves in a small chamber, the walls, of which were solid ground, damp and dripping.

"It's chilly where we are, but it is a good place to hide what we have made. This is better in one sense than having to fight every day for what you have. We have no quarrels here, thanks to the Triad."

"The Triad?"

"Yes, the court that crushes rebellion before it opens its eyes. It is better than the old courts of San Pablo and San Diabolo. We know when a man whispers treason in Crossbar. We know the traitor before he thinks out his treason. When he is summoned before the Triad he is a doomed man."

"You need a stern hand among stern men."

"That's it," as Leon opened a door set in the wall and bade his companion go forward. "We must watch and act. The Triad has killed treason in the bud, but it has nothing of that sort of work to do now. All of it was done with relentless hands and the camp is quiet as a lamb. But for the crime last night we might have had nothing exciting for you when you came."

They now stood in a vaulted chamber of cramped dimensions and Leon who was holding the light revealed to Silk Ribbon some shelves which were incumbered with numerous dark-looking bars rough and heavy but which he knew were almost priceless.

The King-pin of Crossbar took down one of these bars and placed it in his visitor's hands.

"It is the pure article. This is what would make the assayers open their eyes, and some day it will. But, as you know, Captain Jason, we have to be cautious and keep for the present the secret of the ten bonanzas of Crossbar."

For a little while Silk Ribbon looked at the gold bar, examining it in all positions, and when he handed it back he remarked on its beauty and richness.

"This is but one of the vaults," said Leon. "We have nearly a dozen more. Rich? Well, we deserved to be," and he broke into a laugh which echoed strangely in that place.

Silk Ribbon leaned against the wall with his face turned to the Crossbar nabob and for a single moment looked again at the shelves and their precious loads.

"I can't get over this murder of last night," said he. "That a woman should stray into Crossbar and find here the

tiger in ambush is almost past my comprehension. She isn't buried yet?"

Leon glanced at his watch.

"Nearly so if not quite. We gave orders to have her quietly put away in the mountain. She was dressed good enough for the grave and I didn't think it necessary to let Irma see her."

"Irma?"

"The girl who is sometimes called the Seraph of Crossbar."

"What was this creature like?"

"She was perhaps five and thirty, though you can't guess a woman's age. She was rather tall and had a wealth of chestnut hair which must have been a treasure to her. Then, she wore shoes that came up high, and was clad for mountain travel."

"You told me awhile ago I think that she carried with her the means of her own identification."

"She did."

"Then you know who she was?"

"Yes. In another part of the country—I hardly know just where—she was known as Grace."

Silk Ribbon was looking at the shelves, but did not show any excitement though as the name was spoken he looked straight into Leon's face and smiled.

"Only Grace?" he asked.

"That is all."

"Captain Leon, you recollect something about Captain Dan? You remember that once he tried to marry a woman who enmeshed him with her black eyes."

"I recall the circumstance."

"Had the dead woman black eyes?"

"I did not notice."

"You may remember what was current then, that the woman who entrapped the captain had a missing finger."

"I might have heard that, too."

"Had Grace a missing finger?"

"I did not look."

"I do not say that the person killed last night is the same who caught the old captain. The black eyes, and even the missing finger, may be signs of identification stronger than those you have mentioned."

"You can see her if you like."

"It isn't necessary," said Silk Ribbon. "I don't care to look at the dead, but if you will, we will go up. It is damp down here, and I have seen enough of the wealth of Crossbar. You are to be congratulated. The other boys look well."

"Leo and Lionel? They are well. Leo gets no older. It seems to me that he is as young to day as when we rode the race for life through the cactus with the Apaches at our horse's heels."

"When he was shot through and through?"

"Ah, you have heard of that race? The old captain told you, did he?"

They went up and stood once more in the little room which they had left some time before.

As they entered, a knock sounded on the door, and Leon opened it to admit one of the other King-pins.

Silk Ribbon saw that they were exactly alike both in looks and physique.

"This is brother Leo," said Leon, introducing the new-comer. "That is the boy who got the shaft."

As Leo put out his hand to shake, he seemed to scowl, but only for a moment, for he suddenly burst into a laugh and opened his shirt.

"The autograph of old Geronimo," he said. "Some day when I want a change, I shall go back and pay the debt."

There was on the white bosom thus displayed to Silk Ribbon a scar, which told him that an arrow had been shot through the wearer of the mark.

"I was just showing Captain Jason the results of work and system," explained Leon, glancing at the trap in the floor. "He has seen old Captain Dan. This letter makes him solid here."

Leo took the same letter which his brother had read and perused it in silence.

At the end of the reading he held it between him and the light. It was a satisfactory test, for with a smile he handed it back to Leon.

"This is passport enough," he remarked, turning to Silk Ribbon. "You are as good as any man in Crossbar from this moment."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FALL OF A 'KERCHIEF.

Nothing was revealed by Silk Ribbon's countenance to show that this decision gave him satisfaction.

His face was as immobile as ever and while he looked at the man who spoke he did not betray his real feelings. As good as any man in Crossbar! This meant that he had from that moment the entree to the tough society of the gold camp, that his letter from Captain Dan, whoever that worthy was, had secured this for him, and that henceforth he would have the three King-pins for friends.

Leo handed back the letter with a bow. He turned to his brother and asked whether the man from the South had been informed as to the crime of the night before.

"I have told all we know," was the answer. "Is the dead buried yet?"

"They have just gone to the mountain."

Leon looked at Silk Ribbon.

"Would you like to see her? It may not be too late yet."

"I would like to look at the face, for a minute only."

"Come, then."

Side by side Silk Ribbon and Leon walked toward the mountain where the pines grew tall and close on the slopes. They passed through the camp, but took a short cut as they neared the scene of the midnight tragedy, and at last found themselves nearing a group of men who were digging a grave.

They stopped as the pair came up, and seeing who Silk Ribbon's companion was they waited till he came alongside.

Silk Ribbon walked to where something with a white cover lay on the ground, and Leon lifted the cover and turned to him with a smile.

"This is the victim of the stroke," he said.

The new-comer went forward and stooped over the pallid face upturned to the stars.

Leon withdrew a pace and watched him.

Did the man called Silk Ribbon by Mountain Morg realize that he was watched by more than ten pairs of eyes? Was he aware that they were regarding him with the keenness of a lot of hawks and that his slightest movement was seen by one and all?

Whether he knew this or not, he did not betray any excitement. As he held up the cloth he looked down into the face of the dead, and seemed to study it in silence.

When at last he dropped the shroud over the white countenance he turned away and caught Leon's eye.

"I am satisfied. She must have died quickly. There is no sign of suffering."

The King-pin met him half way and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"You will have to ask Mountain Morg," said he.

"Do you think he knows?"

"Undoubtedly!"

With a wave of the hand to the rough grave diggers, Leon turned back to the shanties and he and Silk Ribbon went down the trail with their faces toward the scene of what was to be the most exciting of mountain dramas.

"You will want a shanty," suddenly said Leon, the King-pin. "Will you come to ours or do you prefer to be alone while you are with us? The camp is open to you. Take your choice."

"I prefer to be alone, but within call of my friends," was the answer. "If you don't object, I will take the shanty where the woman died."

In an instant he had the eyes of Leon fastened upon him.

"You don't believe in ghosts, then," he exclaimed.

"Not I. If the shanty is not occupied, I will take it for the present."

"It is yours."

Half an hour later the man who had come so abruptly upon the scene stood in the cabin where Mountain Morg and Irma had looked down into the death-struck eyes of the unknown woman.

The door was shut and Silk Ribbon stood leaning against the table which filled the immediate center of the room.

He was quite alone.

For some time he stood thus with his arms folded on his chest and his face toward the window alongside the heavy door.

"It's a foothold," he said at last. "It is

something to start on; but this is a wolf's den and a captive is here already."

What did this man mean? If he had gained a foothold, why had he chosen that particular shanty for his abode, and what had brought him to the place which he had denominated a den of wolves?

Not far off in another cabin with his face glued against a glass not very clean stood a young man who wore his arm in a sling.

It was Oscar.

Driven back by the Three King-pins who had prevented him from carrying out his intention of quitting the camp, he was practically a prisoner, though not so well watched as was Mountain Morg who had fallen into the clutches of the Triad Court of Crossbar.

Oscar had seen something which puzzled him. He had seen Silk Ribbon come back from the mountain burying with Leon, the King-pin; he had seen the pair pass his window, the brilliant starlight revealing their figures as they walked slowly past, one of them, at least, so he thought, ignorant of the fact that he had been remanded back to his own shanty.

"Who is that man with Leon?" asked Oscar, and his words were taken up and sent back to him in a singular echo. "I never saw him before and yet something tells me that his presence here at this time means something. Is that Silk Ribbon? Is that the man mentioned by Mountain Morg?"

A footstep at the door called the youth's attention to it and in a moment he saw Irma standing before him in the light.

The Seraph of Crossbar was white and nervous. As she came forward he noticed that she shut the door carefully and when near him placed her finger at her lips and stopped.

"It is coming. I feel it in my bones."

"What is coming?" he asked.

"Trouble."

The voice of the girl was low and indicative of fear.

"I expect that. You saw how they treated me? You must have seen them drive me back—back into the very meshes of this mountain web when I wanted to get away so as to have no share in what I feel is near at hand."

"They have carried the dead woman to the mountain and there they have made a grave for her. It was a strange interment and I watched it with bated breath."

"You saw it, did you, Irma?"

"I have just come from the spot. I saw them lower her into the grave and without so much as a good word for the soul of the unfortunate, they threw the clods of the mountain over her and went back to the Green Paradise."

"They are like their masters, those men are, and they are human wolves," spoke Oscar bitterly.

"Now," continued Irma, "now they will turn on Mountain Morg. The Triad will close in on him and whether he killed her or not, he will swing for that crime."

Oscar seemed to draw off a space while he looked at her.

"What do you think?"

Irma came closer and with a glance toward the window, said as she seemed to shiver:

"I don't believe he did it, but it wouldn't be advisable for me to go out yonder and proclaim my belief."

"It would not, girl, and I pray you will not. You saw the corpse?"

"I gazed into the face last night by the light of the Piute Pansy's match."

"You never saw that face before?"

"Only in my dreams."

"In your dreams?"

"Yes. Twice, at least, I have seen it thus, but I never thought to find its counterpart in human flesh. I shuddered when I first saw it in the shanty, and, but for my presence of mind, I would have fallen in a faint at Mountain Morg's feet. I dared not tell him that I had seen it before. I let him believe that it had never crossed my path sleeping or waking."

Oscar was silent for a moment and then he thought of the man he had seen with Leon.

"That man came in to-day and is hand-in-glove with the King-pins," said Irma in response to a query about Silk Ribbon.

"Already?" cried Oscar. "What brings those men together?"

"Heaven knows," shuddered Irma. "It is fate, perhaps. But they are sworn friends and Heaven help the person who falls into their hands! That man is not Silk Ribbon. No, he cannot be the man who was mentioned by Mountain Morg, for he would not be with the Three King-pins if he were. I fear for the future peace of Crossbar."

"Listen," and the hand of the youth fell upon the girl's wrist and dragging her to the window, he listened with her to sounds that came into the shanty from the outside.

"That is the voice of Dagon," said Irma.

"I know it—Dagon, the sheriff of the Triad Court. I haven't heard him for some time. The session of the dread court, operated by the brothers three, will soon open. What does Dagon say?"

"To-morrow morning at nine o'clock the Court of the Triad will convene in extraordinary session at the Green Paradise! It will not be a secret session, but all may come who will. Business of importance will come before the tribunal, and all interested are invited to participate. Long live the liberties of Crossbar!"

"The liberties of Crossbar," echoed Oscar derisively. "There is no liberty in this man-ridden camp. To-morrow will witness another crime as dark as the one of last night unless the much vaunted Silk Ribbon comes."

"He will not come. The man in the web will have to meet his fate unassisted. He will die at the hands of the Triad Court and the vultures will pick the bones of Mountain Morg before the sun goes down."

"Irma, I believe it."

They stood at the window listening to the same words they had heard, and as they were repeated as the sheriff went down the street, they drew closer together and their hands met.

Irma turned and looked into the face almost touching her cheek.

"I know not what to think," she said.

"It is the strangest drama I ever saw played. While I stood over the woman who died in the cabin I was seized with feelings I cannot describe. I looked down into the rigid face and all at once it seemed to me that the eyes opened and looked up into mine."

"This cannot be, girl. The dead don't look and their souls come not back after life has fled."

"I know that, but there was a change in the face, whether Mountain Morg saw it or not. He may not have been watching it as I was, therefore he may not have seen what startled me. The eyes surely opened, Oscar."

"And looked at you?"

"They seemed to at any rate. I started and would have cried out if they had not closed as suddenly, and when Mountain Morg touched me I turned away and went off with him. I never saw anything like it, Oscar. It may have been a delusion, but to my dying day I will believe that the woman looked into my eyes with light in her own."

All at once the voice of the high sheriff of the Triad Court was heard once more.

The long, lank fellow had rounded a corner near the cabin and the pair saw him standing in the light.

"He would sooner be high sheriff of that accursed tribunal than be sure of his passport to Paradise," said Irma as she watched Dagon.

"Ay, that man is a slave. He would wade through fire at the back of his three masters and—"

"Look! What is that he has taken from his bosom?"

They pressed their faces against the pane and saw Dagon take out something white with which he wiped his brow. The proclamation which he had been circulating had heated him and he was breathing hard.

"It looks like a lady's handkerchief," whispered Irma. "What need of such a thing has the high sheriff of the Triad Court?"

As Dagon started off something fell at his feet and Irma, grasping Oscar's wrist, started toward the door with a cry.

"Dagon has lost the handkerchief! I

must have it!" she exclaimed, and in another moment she was half-way across the shanty's threshold.

Oscar watched her with a curious smile at his lips.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HIGH SHERIFF DROPS.

IRMA secured the prize and bore it back to Oscar in triumph.

The youth took the handkerchief and looked at it for a moment in the light of his lamp that burned on the little table in the middle of the room.

"It is a lady's handkerchief. See!" cried Irma, breathing hard as she leaned across the table with her heart in her throat as her look indicated.

"In the name of wonder, what was Dagon doing with it?"

"That is the puzzle. It certainly fell from his pocket when he thought he had put it safely away. What is that in one corner?"

The deft fingers of Oscar turned to the place mentioned by the girl and they put their heads together.

At the window, though they saw it not, was a human face with malignant eyes that gleamed like those of a half-famished wolf.

The loser of the handkerchief having missed his property had sneaked back on hunt of it and had tracked it to the shanty and was looking in upon the pair as they inspected it with their curiosity all the time on the increase.

Dagon had the face of an owl.

His eyes were large and owl like and his nose was a hawk bill which seemed to overhang a low, long, sensual mouth.

The very man to obey the behests of the Three King pins, the very person to act as the high sheriff of the Triad Court!

The hands of Dagon rested on the sill. His eyes glared at Irma and Oscar, and when they had examined the handkerchief and Irma took possession of it, hiding it in her bosom, his orbs got a fiendish light, and he fell back to retreat toward the nearest cabin from whose shadows he watched the door which he felt Irma would soon open.

Nor had the wretch to wait very long.

Having said good night to the youth, Irma came out and for a moment stopped at the threshold of the cabin.

"Don't lose it," he heard Oscar say. "It may be a silent witness but an important one. It may turn the scales in the interests of justice. It may be the link that will fasten this murder upon the guilty."

"I will guard it as I would my life. I will hide it when I get home and we will keep the secret of its finding."

The door closed and Irma was on the street.

Dagon looked in every direction. He saw no one. The streets of Crossbar were as silent as death at that hour, and he could see Irma with the treasure in her bosom pursuing her way home.

In another moment he was at her heels.

There was something deadly in the movements made by this owl-eyed monster who obeyed the commands of the Three King pins of the of the gold mine.

There were no leaves to crinkle beneath his feet, no twigs to break and tell the girl that a tiger was nearing her with evil intent.

Irma's cabin was not far away and she would soon be home.

Suddenly the man sprang to one side and was lost to view.

He ran like the wind, and reaching a certain shanty he opened the door and stood against the logs with his hand near the latch and his eyes looking from the little window.

Dagon, the high sheriff, was in Irma's home. He had simply beaten the girl to her place of abode and now was waiting for her like a serpent in the dove's nest.

Irma knew nothing of this. Unarmed, she came on, dreamless of the crouching man in the dark and carrying near her heart the object of Dagon's play.

The door opened and the long hand of Dagon shot toward the portal.

It touched the shoulder of the Seraph of Crossbar and closed there like an electric vise.

With a sudden cry Irma fell back, held by that hand, and seeing the owl eyes of the high sheriff, she tried to break from his grasp but failed.

"Not yet!" laughed the man. "I have a grip like death, girl. I don't want to hurt you, but you must give it up."

Irma knew what these words meant.

She saw the eyes of the high sheriff flit to the spot where the handkerchief was hidden, but the thought of giving it up had not occurred to her.

"It is a silent witness, and may turn the scales in favor of the innocent," Oscar had said, and now this man—this slave of the Three King-pins—wanted her to surrender it.

No, she could not do that.

"I want it, and nothing more," continued Dagon, leaning forward and giving Irma a glimpse of his rage-distorted face. "You are woman and I am man. I have you at the mercy of my hand, and it can crush you like an egg-shell."

Irma did not doubt this. She had seen Dagon strangle a mad-dog on the Plaza, and his feats of strength in other directions were marvelous.

Yes, this man could crush out her life with an effort.

"Where did you get it?" asked the girl.

"Never mind that. I want what you have in your bosom."

"But don't you know that it may shield the innocent?"

"It will shield no one unless you give it up. I want the handkerchief."

Irma felt that the hand on her shoulder was sinking deeper and deeper into her flesh, and she had fallen back the full length of the iron arm, when she was suddenly brought up standing as a mad oath dropped from Dagon's tongue.

"I will have it or your life!" he hissed.

"I must have what you have taken."

Her life for a white handkerchief!

There was something thrilling in the thought, and the girl felt that her life would go out unless she surrendered the fabric to the owl-eyed wretch.

"Stand back—hands off—and you shall have it," she cried.

It seemed the last resource.

"There," he said, dropping her, but not falling back an inch. "I have let go. Now, hand it over."

The hand of Irma moved to the hiding-spot of the handkerchief, and it seemed to burn her fingers when they touched it.

"If I give it up, the witness vanishes," she thought. "That handkerchief contains the identity of the victim of the shanty."

"Quick! I can't stay here all night and wait on you. I haven't completed my work yet. The proclamation must be heard on the east side, and within a certain time."

"What will come before the Triad Court to-morrow?" asked the girl.

"Your case, perhaps," was the sudden answer.

"Why mine?"

"You have stolen the handkerchief, and we punish thieves in Crossbar with the same severity we do murderers. You know that, girl."

He held out his hand, looking at her with the malignity of a wolf; he stepped forward and made a pass, which she parried.

"I must have one or the other—the handkerchief or your life!"

Irma sprang toward the door, but the hand of Dagon, darting out like a snake, seized her and she was thrown back.

"I'll help myself!" he cried.

All of a sudden the door opened and a face at which the high sheriff of Crossbar started made its appearance.

"Ho! what's up hyer?" exclaimed a voice, but before Irma could reply Dagon sprang at the apparition and the next moment, having captured the man, he dragged him inside and at the same time kicked shut the door.

The girl, fleeing to one corner of the cabin, looked on in a tremor, for she saw that Dagon was forcing the man against the wall and like a fiend was burying his long fingers in his short stretch of throat.

All this happening in a second as it were, seemed to paralyze the white-faced spectator.

The advantage was with Dagon and he had the strength of a Hercules.

The very suddenness of the high sheriff's attack had amazed the other party and in the light that came into the room Irma saw a man gasping for breath in the grip of the owl-eyed fiend.

She ran to the door with the intention of throwing it open, but one of Dagon's hands loosening for a moment, caught her midway and hurled her back.

"I will see who interferes with me!" cried the high sheriff. "I will see who comes between me and duty. I am the high sheriff of the Triad Court and no man shall interfere!"

The victim of the attack could not have answered if he had wished to.

The hands of the fiend in human shape were deep in his throat and Irma saw a pair of eyes bulging from their owner's head and doubted not that in a short time he would fall dead at the feet of the officer of the Triad Court.

Why not escape and let them have it out? This thought seemed to send the life blood, sluggish through fear a moment before, quick and hot through the girl's veins.

Once more she sprang at the door. This time she reached it and tore it open. She was on the threshold, her body was half way out when she was clutched by the arm and the voice of Dagon was at her ear.

"You can't get away without giving up the handkerchief!"

Irma turned and looked into the eyes of the man-monster of Crossbar. She saw them swelling with madness and flashing like living coals, and tearing from its hiding-place the treasure she threw it at him and fled.

At that moment, or as the white thing struck Dagon's face, she was released and as the cool air of night touched her face she gave vent to a cry of joy.

Out of the fiend's grasp at last!

Irma ran down the street and turned once more—she knew not where else to turn—toward Oscar's cabin.

At the door she paused and recovered in a measure.

"What am I doing?" she asked herself.

"Why do I turn to this shanty every time? It is imperiling him, for he has been ordered back and they would not let him go away. I will go back—not back to my own cabin, perhaps, but to another where I may be safe till daylight."

She turned back and sought another cabin on one of the short zig-zag streets of Crossbar.

The door was not locked and she went in, closing it behind her with a feeling of relief.

Half a minute later she drew from her bosom a handkerchief to wipe from her white brows the beads of perspiration that had collected there, and looking at it as it flashed before her eyes, she fell against the wall with a strange cry.

"Heavens! I still have the fatal handkerchief! I gave Dagon my own and now he will track me down for this one!"

Irma held in her hand the object which had nearly cost her her life in her own house. She looked at it with eyes that seemed to start from her head, and as a step fell upon her ears she sprang to the door and halted there like a lioness at bay.

If Dagon came he would find the tables turned. There was a determined girl on the watch, and Irma, now resolved to fight both for life and what might be a silent witness of a dark mystery, kept her station with hands clinched and her white lips welded.

But the footsteps passed. They went down the narrow street and after awhile came back.

Irma at the window ventured to strain her eyes to see who made those sounds.

Looking out she saw first a shadow fall across the earth and then its maker came.

"My God! the high sheriff of Crossbar!" fell from her lips in low, half-suppressed whispers, and riveted to the sill, as it seemed, by the sight she beheld, she looked on and saw the sneaking hunter stop.

Dagon was on the trail, but he was a trifle at fault. The quarry was near, but he had missed it.

Irma saw him stoop and look at the dust in the street. She knew that the prints of her feet were there.

Suddenly he sprang up and looked toward the shanty, but ere he could take a step to-

ward it the sharp report of a pistol broke the silence of the scene and the figure of the high dignitary of the Triad Court spun round and dropped at full length in the street.

Irma looked, but saw no one but the quivering form in the dust.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCENE ON THE DESERT.

No one came forward to look at the man lying dead where he had fallen.

Irma gazed upon the body from the window of the shanty where she had taken shelter and watched in vain for the person who had sent a bullet forth for her safety and salvation.

That Dagon, the sheriff, had tracked her down there was no doubt.

The owl-eyed official of the Triad Court had found her out and, eager to rectify the mistake made about the handkerchief, he had followed her with evil intent and had met his fate at the hands of an unknown marksman.

Perhaps the man he had choked in the cabin had come back to life and had paid the high sheriff for his mad work. Irma did not know, and while she looked at the figure lying in the starlight she could not help thinking of the coming day and what it might have in store for more than one citizen of Crossbar.

The moments were painful to her while she waited for the slayer to steal forth and look at his victim. As he came not, Irma became calmer and at last ventured to open the door.

If Dagon was dead the handkerchief was safe now and she could carry it again in her bosom.

What if Dagon was found with her handkerchief embroidered with her initial in his possession? What if she should be called upon to tell how it came there, and she might be summoned before the Triad Court for that very purpose.

Irma's first thought when she looked the situation fairly in the face was to run to the dead man and secure her handkerchief.

"I may be dragged before the tribunal of the Three King-pins," thought the girl. "I may have to stand before them and tell when and how my property came to him. I must secure what is mine and keep what I have."

She looked all around but saw no one. Slipping forth, she stopped for half a second in the starlight and then darted toward the dead man, bent over him and ran her white hand into his pocket.

At that moment a hasty footstep startled her and she looked up.

A few feet distant stood the tall figure of a man unknown to her and as she fell back with eyes starting from her head she gasped, but did not rise.

She had been caught in the act of robbing the dead!

"That's a bad place for you, girl," said the voice of the unknown. "Go back to your shanty and wait."

Irma stood erect and looked at the speaker.

"It is the man who came to-day. It is the person who already is hand-in-glove with the Three King-pins."

He said no more, but walking nearer seemed to look searchingly at Dagon.

"He is dead," said Irma in response to his glance. "He has been shot where he lies."

No reply came from the welded lips of the looker on.

Once more Irma thought of her handkerchief, but the eyes that watched her seemed to deter her from carrying out her intention.

"What do you want here? The dead man was nothing to you, was he, girl?"

"He was Dagon, the high sheriff of the Triad Court. I came to the body for my own."

"Take it and go back."

Thus permitted, the Seraph of Crossbar felt once more in the pocket she had partially searched and found her handkerchief. She drew it forth showing it for a moment to the watcher and then sprung up.

"You are satisfied now, eh?"

"This is what I wanted," and with this

and another look at the stranger, she darted off, nor stopped until she found herself at the door of her own cabin.

"What if there is another dead man in here?" she thought, recalling the struggle between Dagon and his adversary.

But she opened the door and looked in.

A light was burning on the table, but the chamber was empty. There were signs of a battle between two strong men, but no one remained to tell the story of the outcome.

Irma went in.

As for the man who had accosted her beside the dead sheriff, he had long before turned and gone back.

He passed down the street and across the Plaza. Crossbar was rather quiet though the hour was not late and he stopped for a moment and surveyed the open door of the Green Paradise.

Passing on, he knocked at the House of the Triad and soon sat in the presence of the Three King-pins who had apparently been waiting for him.

Silk Ribbon was as cool as a May morning. He doffed his hat and threw it upon the table as with one hand he brushed back the locks rather long and dark.

"Well, are you getting acquainted yet?" queried Lionel.

"Somewhat. I like the place and if I were to stay here, I am sure I would like it more. It isn't quite like the old stamping-ground."

"No," answered the three in chorus. "It is not like that, but there is more money here."

"You seem happy. You have everything your own way and that is something."

"Yes, that is much," said one of the others. "We are masters here. We made the laws that govern this camp and we are the court ourselves. The Triad is all-potent among these rough men and you have to govern men of their stamp with a stiff bit."

Silk Ribbon was silent for a moment.

"You are going to try the prisoner to-morrow, I believe?"

"To-morrow at nine. We have sent Dagon, the high sheriff, through camp to proclaim the extraordinary session of the Tribunal and to summon all to the trial. There is no hope for the accused. He is in the merciless hand of the Triad. He shall perish, and your coming to Crossbar will be celebrated by an event of some importance—one of the acts of the Tribunal."

"It will interest me, of course. I shall be glad to see justice carried out on the person of the guilty. But who was the dead woman? Do you know that this question has strangely affected me ever since I looked down in her face at the mountain grave?"

The King-pins laughed.

"Time may solve that question and if it does you will know. But if fate should decree that it remain a puzzle, why, we will live just as long."

"But perhaps not sleep as well," smiled Leo, the youngest, as he put one of his white womanish hands on the table and looked at the party.

"You spoke of the woman who ensnared the old captain," said Leon, at this juncture.

"What ever became of her?"

Silk Ribbon Sam shook his head.

"Wasn't she captured by the Apaches soon after that, and wasn't it said that this was brought about by the captain's connivance?"

"It was said so, I believe; but Captain Dan is as silent as the Sphinx on that point. At any rate, the woman—the enslaver—vanished and we never saw her after a certain date. Let me see. You left the band soon after the fight at the ford, didn't you?"

The brothers exchanged looks.

"That was our last bout together," said Leon. "We cut off for ourselves after that. We vanished like Salome, ha! ha!"

"I thought so. You went down the river one night with three extra horses and the captain had a time convincing the band that you were not deserters."

At this juncture Lionel, who had not spoken much, leaned forward and for a second seemed to study the face before them. It stood the scrutiny and after awhile the King-pin said:

"There was something about our going which the band never understood. Captain Dan went with us to the cross-trails and

shook hands with us there. He told us that we should come back no more. Do you know why?"

"Captain Dan keeps his secrets so well that we never learned why he told you this."

"It was true about her," continued the speaker. "It was true that this woman had captured Captain Dan, the Plumed Bandit of the Gold Hills. But here is the secret. She was Captain Dan's wife!"

"You don't tell me that?" cried Silk Ribbon.

"She was actually the wife of the old captain. Years before she came to us in the Southwest, she stood by him at the altar, and when she came to him and played that hand which we thought was the hand of an artful snarer, she was in reality Captain Dan's wife."

Silk Ribbon looked amazed, and the Three King-pins laughed.

"She left us at Captain Dan's connivance," Lionel went on. "She was captured by the Apaches, and never came back. Do you know what became of her?"

Silk Ribbon shook his head, but did not remove his gaze from the handsome speaker.

"She died. She died on the desert surrounded by wolves and vultures. This woman, who had the form of a sylph and the face of a Cleopatra; this creature, who would have charmed a cynic, went out on the desert and deliberately courted the death which was there."

"Do you know this?"

"Ay, that we do, else I wouldn't be telling it here. Let me show you something."

Lionel turned from the table and stepped to the right-hand wall.

"The desert tragedy has been preserved by the brush of the artist. It has been portrayed by one who knew what he was painting while he used the brush."

One side of the room was covered with a dark cloth, which seemed a part of the wall itself.

The King-pins looked on and his actions were followed by Silk Ribbon's eyes.

All at once the hand of Lionel reached up and caught the cloth.

In another instant it was drawn aside like a curtain and a painting stood revealed. It filled the whole wall, reaching from ceiling to floor.

Silk Ribbon, leaning back in his chair, looked at the landscape, a desert scene as faithfully portrayed as if painted from nature. He saw the open stretching from horizon to horizon and in every direction the sand and now and then a bunch of starved cacti.

The King-pins glanced at the viewer of the painting and when he seemed to go forward for a nearer inspection the voice of Lionel said:

"Yes, that speck yonder is the actor in the scene. Yonder, as you will see, lies the woman who ensnared Captain Dan and who came to us as his wife, to be sent off by him to perish where she is, underneath a copper sky and with the scourges of the desert at her heels."

Silk Ribbon had left his chair and was staring at the impressive painting. He was viewing it from every standpoint, but his eyes seemed riveted upon the dark spot in the foreground which now had grown into a woman lying on the sand beside a dying steed.

"The artist must have been there," said he.

"Surely he must have been gifted with second sight if he was not," and Lionel dropped the curtain so suddenly that Silk Ribbon seemed to start as he resumed his place in the chair.

"You may think this a singular place for that painting," continued the King-pin. "We rejoice in the death of that woman."

"You do?"

"Yes. She is our enemy. She would in time have prevented us from playing the hand we play in Crossbar. She went to her death and gave us wealth. She was a cool, calculating creature with the face of an angel and the heart of a fiend. Captain Dan's secret wife!"

"And the mother of his children, eh?"

"She had no children," quickly put in Leon. "Heaven never gave to that woman the love of a babe. She wasn't deserving of

it and she died unmourned and unseen save by the un pitying eye of Heaven."

"I heard once—I can't tell you where—that Captain Dan had a child somewhere," said Silk Ribbon.

"You heard so, eh? We would like to find that child! By the hand of vengeance! we would like to find his child if it was the result of his alliance with Salome."

"It was Salome's child!"

The Three King-pins sat spellbound. They looked first at Silk Ribbon and then at one another, and all at once Leon, rising beside the table, said as he glared at the new comer:

"By the eternal! you know where that child is!"

CHAPTER X.

TIGER BLOOD.

SOL SOLSTICE, the man who had guided Mountain Morg to the shanty where lay dead the victim of the unknown dagger, stood leaning against the bar of the Green Paradise and with a long and strong cigar between his teeth was watching a game of cards going on within a few feet of him.

The man had come to Crossbar without any apparent intention. He was strong and raw-boned and his face was the hue of leather, rough and homely.

Perhaps he was thinking about other matters while he watched the game, for every now and then his thin lips twitched and he looked at the dilapidated clock, the only one in camp, that hung on a nail behind the bar.

Sol Solstice seemed a man with two personalities; he could look like different men within the same minute, and he now stood against the counter and said nothing, though the men threw out hints that it was his time to treat.

At last he strolled toward the door with a shuffling motion and leaned his high shoulder against the jamb.

The next moment a man bounded past him and stopped in the middle of the room.

"Somebody's killed Dagon!" this man cried.

In an instant every card fell from the hands of the bronzed gamblers and Sol Solstice, looking up at the messenger of death, knocked the ashes from his cigar.

The inmates of the den were on their feet and "Dagon dead?" was the echo heard on every side.

"He is lying in the street, shot through the head," continued the man. "I will show you in a minute."

Sol Solstice turned to the nearest man and asked quietly:

"Who was Dagon?"

"Dagon was the high sheriff of Crossbar. Didn't you hear him awhile ago proclaiming the session of the Triad Court?"

"I did hear some one on the street. Was that Dagon?"

"It was Dagon and I wouldn't be the man what killed him for all the mines of Medicine Bow."

Already the crowd was surging through the narrow door, cursing the slayer of the high sheriff, and Sol Solstice strolled after them like one not very much concerned.

He reached the spot where the body lay, finding it by the loud cursings that rent the air, and as he drew near twenty men turned to him with scowls and he became the target for dark looks as he came up.

"That's Dagon!" said the tall man who had just risen from an examination of the body. "This is the man who served the Three King-pins of Crossbar, and whose life will be avenged with all the swiftness of enraged justice."

Sol Solstice came up and looked down at the figure in the street. The men of Crossbar looked at him as if his lips, if they would, could throw light on the new mystery of the gold camp; but he merely looked and then turned away.

"It's bad," he said to the nearest men. "The woman first and then this man. High sheriff, you say he was?"

Some one stooped and lifted the body. This was a signal for others to help him and in another moment the corpse was being carried toward the Green Paradise where it was laid on the floor in the light of the lamps.

"Shall we tell the three captains?" asked some one.

"There's no hurry," said another. "We will see what we can do ourselves. Shut that door. Let no man out."

This was done and the portal of the Green Paradise swung shut with an ominous sound.

"Search that man!" was spoken as a finger covered Sol Solstice who had fallen back to the edge of the crowd and as the gang parted, he found himself confronted by twenty men who glared at him like so many wolves.

"You don't think I had a hand in it, do you?" asked Sol as he stepped out and at the same time took his hands from his pockets.

"I own I'm a stranger here and that, as such, I am perhaps open to suspicion; but you can do as you please. Search me."

His very coolness seemed to take the crowd aback for a moment, but the finger did not drop nor did the eyes that regarded him get a mite softer.

"Search him!" said the same voice. "He says he will not resist. There was nothing on Dagon's person and he carried some things which might tempt a common killer."

Strange hands which a moment before he would have resisted with the revolver, felt in Sol's pockets and he stood erect and let them go on.

The result was nothing. Not a thing incriminating was found about him, and the searchers fell back as a smile passed over the leathery face of the man from Nowhere.

"I guess you're satisfied now, but if you're not, why, I'll strip and give you another chance," said Sol quietly and not at all out of humor. "I know what you had a right to think as I am a stranger here. But you won't find me sneaking about killing people, especially people like Dagon was. I don't hunt sheriffs. They generally hunt Sol Solstice."

A murmur and then a laugh went round the crowd and some one called all to the bar.

Sol Solstice looked at the rigid body on the floor and stepped toward it.

"Dead enough. Shot through the head," he was heard to say. "Why don't you tell the Court?"

The three captains will know soon enough; then let the murderer look out!"

A minute later the tall, leathery man had stepped from the Green Paradise. At the door a hand was laid on his arm and he looked down into the face of a man who stood on the ground and nearly a foot lower than the step.

"Don't you know you're in a pickle?" said this person, gazing at Sol. "You were here last night. You came to camp just before they discovered the dead woman in the tenth shanty."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. I stand here, a stranger to you, and tell you to your face that you were in Crossbar last night. You thought no one saw you, but I have eyes and they never fail me. I am Derringer Dick, and I don't want to see you go before the Triad Court."

"Why don't you? When did you take such an interest in me?"

"Never mind that. You will be in the grip of the lions before ten minutes unless you escape. It will not be cowardice to get away now. Sol Solstice, you are as good as dead whether you killed any one or not if you stay where you are."

Sol looked at the man once more and saw the eagerness that seemed to fill his eyes.

"They have Mountain Morg now and you will keep him company. He is doomed, no matter who killed the woman in the shanty. You will be doomed for the death of Dagon."

"But it wasn't my work."

"That makes no difference. You are a stranger here and the Triad Court is merciless. You don't want to go, eh?"

The speaker drew off with a last glance and Sol Solstice followed him away.

"You know me?" he said.

"I know you for a fool if you remain. I will let you fight it out. There!"

"But you won't tell me who killed the woman, nor who dropped Dagon, the high sheriff of Crossbar."

"I don't know. I don't want to see you feel the rope of the Triad Court! Hark! don't you hear the voices over yonder? They have told the Three King-pins. They have acquainted them with the tragedy. You are doomed. It is too late!"

Sol Solstice had turned his head and was

listening to the sounds which the wind bore to his ears. They came from across the Plaza and from what he had seen of Crossbar, he knew who dwelt there.

"Just as you will," said Derringer Dick. "When you are in the death-web you cannot say that I didn't give you a chance to escape. I am through."

For half a second, with his face a study, the man stood in front of the Green Paradise and looked toward the house of the Three King-pins. The noises in that direction increased and he at last caught sight of a lot of human figures. They were indistinct as yet, but still they were visible enough with their import to him.

It seemed a moment of indecision to Sol Solstice.

He watched the moving forms awhile longer and then went forward.

The street, stretching toward the mountain and its mines, lost itself among the dark shadows of trees and cliffs and Sol turned in that direction with a resolve which seemed to have taken possession of him against his judgment.

He walked rapidly for a spell and then stopped again.

"Shall I go?" he asked himself. "I can come back. Yes, in the course of time I can return and play another hand. This is but the beginning, and I have much to do. I will go! I will turn my back upon the pards of Crossbar, but not for long. I will come back *en masque*. They shall look at me and know me not. They shall gaze into my eyes which, black now, will be gray then. Ah! they will not know Sol Solstice."

He laughed and walked on.

The cabins were being left behind. He was near the last one and as he passed it he turned for the last time and for a little while looked over his shoulder with his lips welded.

"A thousand curses upon the man who came between!" he hissed. "I will get even with him as well as with the pards of Crossbar. I will let no man come between me and my vengeance and no woman, either!"

Down through the shadows went the strange man. He gained the mountain slope and climbed it to a spot that overlooked the lights and shanties of the gold camp.

There he paused and looked down. He seemed to see what was going on within the precincts of Crossbar. The sounds that came up to him—the lights that flitted hither and thither—seemed to tell him everything, and while he looked he smiled and ran his hand over the hard face which the suns of trails and deserts had tanned.

"They say they have a painting in the house which I would like to see," he muttered. "I hear that they have the scene portrayed on canvas, covered with a curtain which they pull aside whenever their tiger natures want stirring up. I will see that painting. I will pull aside that curtain myself and I will stand in the House of the Triad and see for myself. You may try and condemn. You may play the hand you have played for years. The mines of Crossbar may yield for you, men of the old trail, their wealth; they may pour gold at your feet and make you the nabobs of the great West, but remember that at your heels is a nemesis that never sleeps and that the painting in your house of mystery shall be looked upon by eyes which you think moldered long ago where the cactus throws its thorny shadow on the sands!"

He turned away as a roar like that of a dozen mobs came up from below. He turned from Crossbar and its lights and threw himself deep among the shadows of the mountain path. But the echo of his words was borne along the trail and he laughed when he shut his hands and lifted them heavenward with a curse of rage.

Sol Solstice passed out of sight and saw not the sights that were revealed by the lamps of Crossbar.

He did not see a white-faced young girl at the door of a certain cabin with her hands clasped; he saw not a youth who listened at a window while curses and oaths of madness came to his ears, he did not see the tall man who leaned against the logs of a certain shanty asking himself what it all meant, when, if he had considered, he might have known that it meant in part his own death.

Mountain Morg heard the sounds which

followed the finding of Dagon dead in the street.

The Piute Pansy, standing near his door could hear everything, and now and then catch a glimpse of the wild mob which watched the stern faces of the three captains as it waited for the signal of destruction.

But what had become of Silk Ribbon Sam?

Where amid all this tumult was the man who had come upon the scene and whom we saw last among the Three King-pins with the accusation of Leon ringing in his ears?

Near the body of Dagon he stood. Near the dead man he drew his handsome figure up, and, without a sign indicative of fear, looked at the marble face and then turned with the coolness of a stoic toward the Three King-pins and, with the others, waited for them to unchain the tigers thirsting, clamoring for the blood of Mountain Morg since Sol Solstice had effected his escape.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GOLD CROSS.

"By the eternal! you know where that child is!"

Such were the words that fell from the lips of Leon of the Three as he leaned forward a few minutes prior to the events of the foregoing chapter and looked down into the calm eye of Silk Ribbon Sam.

This scene was in the House of the Triad and the new-comer and the three brothers were together.

If the man accused knew he said nothing.

They had been talking about Captain Dan, the Plumed Bandit of the Gold Hills, and it had been told that the woman killed so mysteriously in Crossbar had been his wife.

"You know where that child is, I say," repeated Leon.

"That is cool, by my soul!" laughed the stranger. "Just because I have said they had a child, I am accused of knowing where that offspring is. Why shouldn't you know as well, since you have told me something about that woman's end—even showing me a painting representing that event," and he glanced at the wall now again hidden by the curtain which concealed the painting of the death in the desert.

"Come!" said Lionel, touching Leon on the arm and facing him with a sober countenance. "We must not treat our guest this way. He may not know, brother."

"I beg your pardon," and Leon colored as he spoke. "I felt my blood run like lava through my veins, and whenever I think of that woman I am not myself. If I thought she had a living child I would hunt for it nor cease until I had my fingers at that child's throat. What will you have?"

He walked to a concealed sideboard in the wall and set glasses and decanters on the table.

Silk Ribbon Sam saw the cloud pass without a sign of fear nor a breath of relief. Perhaps he was prepared for the worst, perhaps he could have met a repetition of the charge with coolness and given his accuser blow for blow, but the storm had drifted past and all was clear again. But how long he could not tell.

They filled their glasses, did these four men, and touched them over the table.

"Here's to our enemies! May every one feel our hand and sink before their time into the sleep of the grave!" cried Leon. "And here's to the child of the she serpent. May that child perish as its mother perished, but, unlike her, leave behind no progeny to curse this earth of ours."

Silk Ribbon looked over the rim of his glass and caught the flash that lit up the eyes of the speaker and then drank the toast he had proposed.

Suddenly a man rushed into the room but stopped at the threshold as if afraid to come further without permission.

"What is it, Phil?"

"Dagon is dead!"

In this manner came to the Three King-pins of Crossbar the intelligence that took them to the Green Paradise where lay the high sheriff of the camp at the end of the play and with a bullet in his head.

When he had looked at the body awhile, Silk Ribbon Sam fell back and caught Leon's eye.

"This is the work of a new foe," said that worthy. "The Triad will have more than one victim. It will find the person who killed Dagon for he was an officer of its court and he shall be avenged!"

Silk Ribbon reached the shanty which he had taken since coming to Crossbar and stood at the door listening to the sounds which the wind bore to his ears.

He heard the voices of the mob ready at any time to rush to the other shanty and drag forth Mountain Morg, and for nearly an hour he guessed its feeling by its growling.

"Here, what are you doing alone?" said a voice, and Silk Ribbon fell back as he looked at the person who stood at the door, having come up so noiselessly as to attract no attention.

The stranger pard held the door open and the speaker came in.

It was Oscar.

For the first time they stood face to face and Silk Ribbon wondered what had brought the young man to him at that hour with the camp in a furor and blood at fever heat.

"I can't help seeking you out," continued Oscar, as he looked at Sam. "I can't help thinking that our fortunes are to run in the same groove—"

"In the same groove? Our fortunes? I don't understand you."

The youth seemed to take a long, painful breath.

"It may not matter where my fortunes run. I am in the web. They would not let me go when I wanted to. They ordered me back—the King-pins did, and here I am with a wounded arm. I was shot from ambush. I was wounded from a shanty the door of which opened as I went by and I felt the ball in my wrist."

"Who would shoot you and why?"

The young man smiled and for another moment was silent.

"They don't like me in Crossbar. I have beaten some of them at the game of gold. I have sold shares to Mountain Morg, but that's neither here nor there. That isn't the real cause of trouble. I am too 'free' for them."

"You mean that you haven't joined the family of the Triad?"

"That is it, in part. I never would come to court when Dagon summoned us. I preferred to remain away and they don't like it."

"Do you think you were shot for that reason?"

"Partly for that reason," was the answer. "I am not a Triad. I am not in touch with the Three King-pins. They don't like me, but, mind you, I don't say that one of them shot me."

Silk Ribbon Sam watched the change of countenance while the youth spoke and when he had finished he fell back and threw a swift glance toward the street.

"When did you come to Crossbar?" asked Sam.

"I've been here a year."

"Where did you come from?"

"From down yonder—past the buttes and far across the open."

"You mean from Colorado?"

"Beyond that yet."

"What brought you to Crossbar?"

"I don't know—fate, perhaps."

"Are you satisfied here?"

"I ought to be. I've made money, but awhile ago I discovered that I don't own anything, though I have been permitted to work the Black Rattlesnake and to take from its depths some of the best gold in the region. The King pins told Mountain Morg when he asserted his citizenship and backed it up with the shares I had sold him, that I never owned a share. If that is true I have been working other people's property and what I have taken from the mine is not mine."

Silk Ribbon Sam heard the youth through and then seemed to give him a smile for his trouble.

"If this be the case you are in a trap. You will feel the displeasure of the King-pins—"

"I've felt that already," was the interruption. "But what matters it? I have been a rolling stone. I can go back to the old life. I can return to the old gulches and

count, as I used to count, the hundred peaks kissed by the morning sun."

"Where was that?"

"In the Big Basin."

"You've been there, then?"

"Yes. Some of the happiest days of my life were passed there. I was a hermit and I am sorry I ever turned my back on those scenes. I used to read the strange inscriptions on the rocks and they puzzled me, especially one which seemed to belong to my life, I don't know why. More than once I have lowered myself over the rocks and read the inscriptions on the walls of the gulch. You have never seen them, I suppose?"

"I don't know," said Silk Ribbon, half reflectively. "I have gone down the Big Basin. My trail has taken me nearly everywhere."

"Your trail?" cried the youth with a sudden start.

"Never mind, boy. We all are trailing something—no matter what part we play in life."

"Do you remember the white rock which lifts its head higher than the others in the Big Basin?"

"Old Moses? I recollect him."

"Well, many a time I have climbed to the crest of Old Moses and waited for the woman who never came."

"For the woman who never came?" cried Silk Ribbon.

"Yes. It is a singular story. I was much younger than I am now and one morning I was out in the gulch alone. I had gone to the same spot a thousand times during my hermit life, but this time I became aware that I was seen by some one. Presently down the gulch came a horse carrying a woman, and when the rider saw me she drew rein and with the quickness of a cat, drew over her face a veil which effectually concealed it. I recollect that this person rode a black horse, lithe of limb and foaming at the mouth. Her figure was perfection and I stood like one spell-bound and gazed at her."

"For some moments she looked at me, apparently wondering what had brought us together, and all at once she spurred her steed forward and stopped within a few feet of me. My curiosity, great before, was uncontrollable now. I sprung forward, but was waved back by a gloved hand while the unseen lips addressed me:

"Stand where you are!" she said. "We must not meet, but the time is coming when on the crest of Old Moses we will stand face to face and you shall look at the features hidden now. Watch the crest of the peak. When you see outlined against the sky the figure of a horse, climb to the top and the face hidden from you now will stand revealed."

"In another moment I found myself alone in the gulch and for some time I waited, expecting the veiled woman to return and talk further with me, but I waited in vain. Months passed. Day after day I turned my face toward the peak and watched the bared head of Old Moses. I was obeying the strange woman. One day I saw outlined against the fleecy clouds that drifted over the top the head of a horse, and knowing the trail that led to the peak, I ran forward and began to climb the trail. Eagerness goaded me on, and after a long climb I gained a spot from whence I could see the bare top of the mountain. A horse was there—a huge black horse standing out against the sky, and crawling forward cautiously, I stopped and looked again.

"The black horse had vanished. I could not believe my eyes. I rubbed them, half believing I was the victim of a dream or mirage, but I was awake. I went on and stopped on the very pinnacle of Old Moses. Far beneath me lay the country and the gaping gulches of the Big Basin. All around were the wild mountains whose trails I knew as the sailor knows the sea. I strained my eyes for the black horse and his rider, but I saw them not. Suddenly at my feet I discovered something which had escaped my eye for I had been looking afar and not at the ground.

"I stooped and possessed myself of the object and this is what I found."

Oscar thrust one hand in his bosom and drew forth something with a buckskin cover.

Silk Ribbon Sam watched him as he unwrapped the covering and seemed carried off

with curiosity as the object came slowly into view.

"This is what I found on the crest of Old Moses," continued Oscar. "I have carried it ever since, hoping that some day I could restore it to its owner. Look at it, sir, and tell me if you know who the owner is."

Sam took the object and looked at it as it lay in his hand.

It was a gold cross an inch in length and in each arm a diamond which Oscar had not disturbed.

"I never saw anything like that," said the youth, looking up into Silk Ribbon's face.

"You say you found it on the mountain after the apparition of the black horse?"

"I found it then."

"You haven't examined it very close. You don't know, perhaps, that it opens—thus!"

Sam, as he spoke, suddenly twisted the main stem of the cross and to Oscar's astonishment took off the top, showing him a little hollow into which he looked with staring eyes.

In another minute Silk Ribbon Sam turned the cross up and shook out into his hand a bit of paper, which still further increased the youth's astonishment.

"What are you—man or devil?" cried the waif of Crossbar.

"Man," was the reply. "Look here, boy. Have you ever been to the House of the Triad?"

"I was there once."

"Did you see the painting on the wall—the hidden scene of death on the desert?"

"My curiosity led me to pull aside the curtain as I waited in the room for Leo. It was so real—so terrible, that my limbs seemed to give way beneath me and I would have fallen but for a mighty effort which I put forth. I see it now as if it were painted on the wall yonder—the waste, the hovering vultures, the black horse dying of thirst, the lone woman sucking the blood from his heated neck. Yes, yes, I see it all again."

Oscar covered his eyes as if to keep out a sight which had suddenly risen to torture him.

"Well, boy, when you saw that painting you witnessed some of the sufferings of the wearer of this cross," said Silk Ribbon Sam.

"Do you tell me this? Then, you know who she was."

"I have not said so, but I will say it now. I know who she was! I know who lost the gold cross on the top of Old Moses. I know who left it in the dust for you to pick up and wear next your heart. She went from that place to the desert."

"And died there as that horrid painting shows?"

"No," said Silk Ribbon, coolly, as he watched the eager countenance of the youth. "She did not die there. She perished elsewhere. There, don't question me further. You must live and learn. Whatever happens in Crossbar tell no one that I have told you this, nor that I have taken from you the cross found on Old Moses. This is one of the missing links. This cross almost completes the chain!"

CHAPTER XII.

SOME STARTLING NEWS.

THE death of Dagon, the high sheriff of Crossbar, seemed the crowning event of the excitement.

The body was taken from the Green Paradise and carried to the man's shanty, where it was placed on the couch, there to await burial on the mountain.

The Three King-pins went home and Leo shut the door behind them. They were sullen and carried themselves with a reserve which boded evil for those whom they hated.

In the chamber where was the veiled painting they stopped and took seats at the table. A light burning there showed their faces and revealed as well the hands that rested on the edge of the board and appeared ready for deadly work.

"This camp must have a high sheriff," said Lionel. "We must fill Dagon's place at once, for an important session of the Triad Court is near at hand and it cannot be held without a high sheriff."

The brothers looked at one another and for a moment nothing was said:

"There are brave, cool men in Crossbar—there are men who are worthy to step into Dagon's shoes. Here, write on a piece of paper your choice and we will ballot."

Leo and Leon took from their pockets bits of paper on which they each wrote a name, after which all three threw into Lionel's hat the slips.

"Who shall draw out the lucky man?" asked that brother.

"You," said Leon.

Lionel thrust in his hand and drew out one of the slips and handed it to Leon.

"Who is to be the high sheriff?"

"Derringer Dick."

"That will do. The man is cool and merciless. He will fill Dagon's shoes to perfection. Shall we see him now?"

"At once."

Ten minutes later there stepped into the chamber the newly elected official of the Triad Court.

Derringer Dick came forward with a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth half concealed by the chestnut beard that covered his face and standing near the curtained painting, he awaited orders.

"You are Dagon's successor," remarked Leon. "We have made you high sheriff of Crossbar. You know something of the duties of the office. You are to open and close court; when necessary you are to carry out the sentences of the Triad and to shrink from nothing that emanates from the Tribunal."

The new sheriff bowed.

"The court," continued Leon, "convenes in extraordinary session at nine o'clock tomorrow. Mountain Morg, the prisoner, is to be tried for the murder of the woman found dead in the tenth cabin. You will conduct the prisoner to the court and see that he is protected during the proceedings."

The man again inclined his head and then touched his hat to the stern judges of the Triad.

When the door had closed on his figure and the trio were alone, Leo, leaning quickly toward his brothers said:

"Which of you placed that man's name in the hat?"

"I did," answered Lionel. "I placed in the hat the name of Derringer Dick. I have seen his coolness tested. He is calm under all circumstances and will carry out to the letter the mandates of the Triad Court."

"You are sure of that?"

"Why not?" Lionel flushed a little. "Why should I suggest a name not calculated to reflect honor on its chooser?"

"I will submit. It is the decree of the Tribunal. Derringer Dick is the new high sheriff of Crossbar. Let him serve us well in that capacity."

"Which he will do. Now for the preliminaries."

Leon went to the wall and opening a little door set in the side, took out a small black box which he carried to the table.

A lot of papers were taken out and the bronzed hand of the King pin ran over them while he was watched by his companions.

"The man will plead not guilty," said Leo.

"Of course."

"He will make a vigorous defense."

"Which will avail him nothing. The man is as good as dead now. Mountain Morg is a fire-brand to us and the Triad Court must put out the blaze before it is fairly started. He came hither for a purpose. He is here for mischief. What has become of the man's chief? He was serving a cool head before he came hither. This letter from the old region tell us this."

A letter already open in Leon's hand was read for perhaps the twentieth time.

"The man whom Mountain Morg serves is a man-hunter—one of those oath bound cool-heads who quits no trail till he has found the end of it. This man, whose whereabouts we know not just at this time, is liable to turn up here. He is cool enough to come to Crossbar and when he comes, unless we have crippled him by the death of his spy and pard, we may lose the play."

"Then down with the man in the shanty! Death to Mountain Morg, spy and informer."

The hand of Lionel came down upon the table with emphasis and the others nodded.

"To maintain our authority here the Triad Court must make swift work of the man in its clutches. It must put out of the way to-morrow the Piute Pansy, so-called. This must be his last picnic."

"A picnic of death!" ejaculated Leon. "This man must not escape from the meshes of the Triad. Look at the woman in the desert. Gaze upon the greatest enemy we ever had, and know that the detective who sent Mountain Morg in advance, is avenging her death."

Leon stood up and drew aside the curtain that hid the painting of torture. He held it aside for his brothers to gaze upon the scene, which they did from their chairs, speaking not but looking with all eyes at cacti and sand with the terrible scene in the foreground.

"Remember! This man dies to-morrow," admonished Leon, as he dropped the curtain and once more took his seat. "To-morrow the man who is under arrests pays the penalty. His last moments shall be treated to a revelation. He will know just before the end comes that he is not hanging for the murder of the woman, but that he is the spy of his oath-bound, cool-head master."

"Captain Jason seems to take no interest in the fate of Mountain Morg beyond the common one we would take in the death of any stranger by the Tribunal."

"Captain Jason is a strange man, but he is cool. He comes from Captain Dan and knows that Salome was his real wife. He may not know what became of Salome's child but he could tell us something we don't know on this point."

"I like the man," said Lionel. "You, Leon—you played a sudden hand when you accused him of knowing what became of the child whose existence is a mystery to us; but he was not the man you took him to be."

There was no reply for a moment, but Leon suddenly exclaimed:

"If I thought that child lived I would quit Crossbar at once and take the trail. Salome's offspring, if living, would naturally be our enemy, as the mother was. But we can't look now. To-morrow the trial of Mountain Morg takes place and if you will let me go I will prepare the evidence."

Leon left the room and passed to another to reach which he was obliged to descend several steps into the darkness of an underground chamber, where he lit a lamp and placed it on a rough table.

The walls of the room were high and bare and the light threw the shadow of the King-pin against the gray stone.

Leon sat down and took from his pockets some papers which he attacked with pen and ink. He wrote painfully as if the task cost him a great deal of mental labor, and at the end of an hour he looked up and pushed the papers from him.

"Who is there?" asked the man, springing suddenly to the door and laying his hand on the latch as he waited with bated breath for a reply.

"Open, Leon, for heaven's sake!"

In another second the King pin had thrown wide the portal and was looking into the face of Leo, the younger member of the Triad.

"What is it?"

Leo advanced to the table and stood in the light as he gazed at Leon watching him like a hawk.

"Here! Look at this!" he cried, taking from his bosom something that glittered in the light.

The hand of Leon darted forward and snatched it from the fingers that extended it, and in a moment he was leaning forward looking at the object thus secured.

"In the name of heaven, where did you find it?" he asked without looking up.

"Never mind that now. What do you think of it?"

Leon turned over and over the gold cross in his hand and then laid it on the table, where the diamonds in the cross-piece glinted like silver stars.

"I stole it. I played thief awhile ago. I robbed the man who had that cross in his possession."

"You did?" In crossbar?"

"In Crossbar," answered Leo, "I had to play it fine—I had to risk my life, but look what I obtained."

Leon picked up the cross again and looked it over once more.

"It belonged to *her*!" he said. "It belonged to her before she went out on the desert."

"Yes. It was Salome's."

"It must have gone through many strange adventures to have found its way to Crossbar."

"I don't doubt that."

"And so you've robbed some one of this precious relic of our old enemy?"

"That's just what I did. I saw him looking at it in the light of his lamp, and for me to see that cross in his hands was to feel my blood turn to fire and to swear that I would have it or his life."

"That was right, brother. But we will finish the carrier of the cross to-morrow. When the sun goes down, Mountain Morg will not know anything more about the gold cross which accompanied him to his death. It is a lucky find."

"Mountain Morg!" echoed Leo. "Who told you that I found this cross in his possession?"

A singular look came to Leon's eye and he almost threw himself upon his brother.

"What, didn't you rob the Pansy to-night?"

"I haven't seen him since sundown. I robbed quite another person. I had plundered Mountain Morg I wouldn't have found the cross."

"You don't mean that you have discovered and robbed the man called Sol Solstice who fled from camp before we could lay hands on him?"

Leo laughed again.

"I robbed Silk Ribbon!"

Leon started violently, and then fell back as he stared at the man who had spoken.

"You don't mean that? You don't mean that on Silk Ribbon's person you found this relic of the woman who died on the desert?"

"I found it nowhere else. I waited for him to fall asleep. I entered the shanty at the risk of my life. I found the cross next his heart and came off with it in my hands."

"Here, take it back!" said Leon, snatching up the cross and handing it to the surprised Leo. "Take it back to the man whom you robbed."

"But—"

"Don't let him know that he has been touched. I see something. I have had a terrible revelation. Take it back at the risk of your life again. Let the man from the South believe that we know nothing of this thing being in Crossbar. That man is the trailer. That man is the oath-bound cool-head—the avenger of the woman who died in the desert. The cross proves it. Take it back!"

With the cross in his hand Leo stood before his brother and looked him in the eye.

"Strike him at once!" he cried. "If this is true—if Silk Ribbon is the avenger—the sooner the Triad closes in on him the better."

"He can't escape. He is in the net now. This man has risked his life on a throw of dice and fate has loaded them against him. Take the cross back!"

Thrusting the fateful thing into his bosom, Leo turned away and Leon saw the door swing shut behind him.

The next moment the man left behind dropped into his chair with livid face and stared at the naked wall."

CHAPTER XIII.

BACK IN THE LION'S DEN.

CHARGED with a dangerous mission, Leo stole back through the shadows of Crossbar.

He wondered if the theft of the cross had been discovered, whether Silk Ribbon had found out that he had been plundered, and when he had reached the vicinity of the shanty where the man reposed he became more cautious than ever and gained the door to listen there like a thief in the dark.

All was still on the inside of the shanty and Leo, as cool as ever, opened the door, which was not locked, and slipped inside.

He found Silk Ribbon Sam as he had left him, sleeping heavily on the rude bed in one corner, and stealing forward on tip-toe, he deposited the cross in the same spot from

whence he had taken it, and then, with a last look at the face partly revealed by the dim light that prevailed, he crept back and out again.

Everything had gone well with the Kingpin of Crossbar. He had restored the cross in the bosom from which he had taken it and the sleeper was none the wiser for the theft.

"That settles another man's fate," thought the youngest of the Triad as he crossed the narrow street and threw a look backward at the shanty. "The man who came to Crossbar with a mission, having sent his spy pard ahead, will soon feel the hand of the Triad Court!"

Silk Ribbon Sam slept on, his arm falling over the edge of the couch and his face turned to the door through which the noiseless thief had gone.

Morning lit up the hills and valleys of Medicine Bow.

The first rays of light penetrated the shanties and fell athwart the scrubbed floor of the Green Paradise where the night before had lain the blood of Dagon the high sheriff.

A man crossed the step of the famous resort and turned to the counter as he cast a wistful glance at the rows of black bottles within the barkeeper's reach.

This person was rather tall and well built. He wore his hair short and was broad of shoulders, while over his eyes drooped a mass of darkish brows which gave him a peculiar appearance.

He leaned on the counter and nominated his drink, a very mild one for the look of the man, and when it had been handed out to him his hand took up the glass and held it between him and the open door.

"Looks like old Santa Sabin," he said with a glance at the barkeeper. "It recalls the days of '68 when we lived in the hollow with the big hills all round us, the merriest lot of scalawags you ever saw. Glorious days, those, when we cared nothing for man or the devil and when some of the pards would have waded through fire for fight. I guess I'm the only relic of those times—the sole survivor, as it were. I feel lonely. I wish I was dead!"

He drained the glass and set it down with a sigh.

"You don't know much about Santa Sabin?" he went on as a figure darkened the doorway and threw a shadow across the speaker's shoes.

"Never heard of it, sir."

"What, never heard of the pards of the small-pox-doomed camp?" and the voice was a revelation of astonishment. "Why, thirty died in one day and the air was black with vultures."

"We never heard of it, I say."

"Well, that beats my time all hollow. I say, stranger, haven't you heard the story of Santa Sabin?"

The question was addressed to the man who had come in, a good-looking person who was eying the relic from Santa Sabin with a good deal of open curiosity.

"I heard of such a camp, but it was years ago."

"Certainly, years ago. It was in '68 or thereabouts when the old camp was in the height of its glory, but the small-pox hit it the next year and did the work. I'm the last one."

The speaker leaned his elbow on the bar and looked at the persons he addressed.

"I am Julius—Julius, the Man with the Blasted Hand."

He lifted his left hand as he spoke and the two who looked at the member saw a singular looking mark down the back of it from wrist to fingers.

"It is useless, I can't lift it to my head," he continued. "It came upon me in the course of a night. I felt a pain and then my hand seemed to shrink. The camp doctors said they never saw anything like it and I guess they told the truth for once. I never try to lift anything with the hand. See! The mark is white, like a burn. It has paralyzed the leaders and I am but one handed. That's why they call me Julius the Man with the Blasted Hand. What'll you have?"

Both the pard of Crossbar and the barkeeper took "something" at the stranger's expense and they saw that he paid out of his right hand pocket, that, in fact, the left pocket in his pantaloons was sewed up

as if to confirm the story of the useless member.

"Having times here, ain't you?" said Julius.

"Who told you?"

"A man I ran across in the mountains last night."

"What sort of a man?"

"A fellow with long hair and black eyes. Mine are gray, you see, not like his at all. He seemed anxious to get out of the region as soon as possible, but I corraled him long enough to learn that he wasn't needed here, that is, not for any good that he might do Crossbar. Yes, he said you war having times."

"We are. You have come to Crossbar in time to see how we work," said the manipulator of drinks as he leaned on the counter and spoke with a sly look at the other one.

"Maybe they won't let me stay."

"Oh, yes they will," was the response. "We are going to have a trial by the Triad?"

"The court, eh?"

"Yes."

"The man who was fleeing from the wrath to come told me about your court. He said it wasn't to be fooled with."

"That man was right. The Triad Court of Crossbar isn't to be tampered with."

"He said a woman had been killed in camp, and I think he hinted at another death."

"The death of Dagon, the high sheriff."

"He did mention Dagon. A funny name for a man, but no funnier than others I've heard."

Julius of Santa Sabin slouched along the counter and seeing a chair dropped upon it with a feeling of relief audibly expressed.

"It may be something to be the sole survivor of a camp, but it's rather lonely," said he. "I've been the sole survivor for years and I sometimes feel like I'd like to j'ine the boys. You don't know what it is to be the last pard. I—"

He was interrupted by voices, and into the Green Paradise trooped half a dozen of the earliest risers, their giant figures showing against the sunshine that came in at the open door.

The Man with the Blasted Hand looked up, but made no move. In a moment he was being studied by all and some of the men looked to the barkeeper and his companion for an explanation.

"The last of the old camp, gentlemen," said the waif, rising and touching his hat. "You see before you the sole survivor of Santa Sabin in Julius of the Blasted Hand."

Then he sat down again and crossed his legs.

"See here! I know something about that camp," said one of the six.

In a moment the face of the stranger underwent a change.

"You do? Well, that's a God-send. I've been looking for some one who knew the old camp in the days of its glory—"

"I was there then."

"And saw me, eh?"

With the aid of his good hand, the speaker lifted the blasted member and held it up.

"It's the same old hand—my companion through sorrow and happiness though I've not had much of the latter."

"Are you Julius of Santa Sabin?"

"I am Julius."

The two men stood face to face for a half-minute.

"I thought Julius was dead."

"Wish he was. I've been wishing so at intervals ever since the smallpox scourged us. Dead? I'm the living Julius, the man who went out over the hills to bring relief to the pards shut up in the old camp."

"You never went back."

"I went back to find that no relief was needed—that the last man lay dead in the pest-house on the mountain slope with a serpent asleep on his bosom."

"That is true," said the questioner, turning to his companions. "The last man to die in Santa Sabin was found thus by those who entered the camp shortly after the close of the drama."

"I went back then. With the fever of"

the small-pox on me I turned from the scene. In the mountains I fought the scourge and an Indian prevented me from being marked by the terror."

"Julius had something else distinctive besides the blasted hand," said the other.

"I know. He had a burn on his bosom. He had there an old scab which could tell a story of suffering before the small-pox skinned the camp. It is here!"

In another instant the Man with the Blasted Hand had bared his breast and all were looking at a scar over the heart.

"That's the companion to the hand," the owner of the scar went on. "I had black eyes when the terror struck me; when I came out from the red-skin's wigwam my eyes were gray and gray they've been ever since."

Nothing was said for some time, but during these moments the whole party drank at Julius's expense.

The sun rose higher and touched spots it had not touched before.

The Man with the Blasted Hand strolled out and looked about the camp with the air of one who had not seen such a camp before.

Naturally he reached the side of the Plaza where the House of the Triad stood, and while looking at it the door opened and Leon of the Three Captains came out.

"This way," said the King-pin, and Julius went forward and stopped in front of the door.

"Will you come in?"

"If you please. I am Julius of Santa Sabin. I am the Man with the Blasted Hand—"

"I have heard that much. I have heard that you came in awhile ago—that you saw a man in the mountain who told you that we were having exciting times here."

Into the chamber where the painting hung concealed tramped the stranger and Leon left him for a moment.

Julius looked around and a faint smile came to his mouth. He rested the crippled hand on the edge of the table, lifting it there with the good one, and as he fell to watching the door through which Leon had vanished, he muttered:

"You're back in the lion's den, Sol Solstice. This is the coolest, deepest game of your life. You must play it well or follow Dagon, the high sheriff of the tiger court."

This man Sol Solstice?

It seems impossible, for when we saw that worthy walk from camp he had no blasted member, his hair was long and his eyes black and piercing.

At the table he sat and waited for some one to come back to him.

No sound came to his ears; he did not know what would happen.

If he was Sol Solstice had not his identity been discovered and the fraud been exposed? There were keen eyes in Crossbar and their owners ruled with a rod of iron, and the Triad Court was their merciless weapons of destruction.

At last the door opened and Leon came back.

"You are here in time to see something exciting—something never witnessed in Santa Sabin from what I have heard of the camp. But first I will show you something. You may have seen the desert, but not the particular scene we have here."

The soft, dark hand of Leon lifted the curtain and the painting stood revealed.

Julius did not start. He merely leaned forward in the chair and after looking a moment asked with the coolness of a philosopher:

"That's the old desert to a T? Did you paint that picture, captain?"

Despite his composure, Leon, the King-pin, had to smile.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING BREATHING SPELL.

OSCAR, the young denizen of Crossbar, could not help thinking about what Silk Ribbon had said to him with the gold cross lying in his hand, and when he went back after the interview, he threw himself upon his couch and fell asleep trying to get at the merits of the case.

Silk Ribbon was a man on a trail, he had

asked him if he (Oscar) had seen the covered painting in the house of the Triad, and he had told him how on a certain occasion he had drawn the curtain aside, and, in the absence of all others, looked at the realistic picture of death in the desert.

Now, the new-comer had told him that the cross belonged to the woman represented as dying on the sand, and he had found the cross of precious metal on the top of a mountain hundreds of miles from Crossbar while looking for the mysterious one who had come into his life, as it were, only to mystify it and make it darker for him.

Yes, he fell asleep thinking of these things and all through the night dreams of strange import rose before him.

Morning came—the morning of the day of Mountain Morg's trial by the Triad Court—and Oscar was one of the earliest astir.

He knew nothing of the events we have recorded in the last chapter; he did not know that a man calling himself Julius, the Man with the Blasted Hand, had invaded the camp, and the theft and restoration of the cross was equally unknown to him.

Oscar had heard the proclamation by Dagon, the high sheriff, the last one he was permitted to make. He had seen the body of the official carried through the starlight to the little shanty where it was to rest until taken to the mountain.

Irma had told him of the sheriff's death.

He knew of the incident of the two handkerchiefs and when he heard that the one supposed to belong to the dead woman was still in the girl's keeping, he turned pale and begged her again to keep her secret inviolate.

Suddenly down the street came the lumbering figure of Derringer Dick, the new high sheriff.

Oscar started when he heard from this man's lips the same sentences he had heard fall from Dagon's.

Dick in his new role was a little out of place, but with his pants buried in the tops of his boots and his hat cocked to one side, made an ideal high sheriff of a merciless court.

"At nine of the clock!" cried Dick, "the Tribunal will convene at the Green Paradise. Let all come and see justice done and the dead avenged. Long live the liberties of Crossbar!"

With this mockery Derringer Dick passed on, his loud voice sounding among the cabins and Oscar shut the door and stood irresolute in the middle of the room.

"I am under the court's ban myself! Shall I attend the session?" he said. "They would not let me go away when I wanted to, but forced me back and here I am, practically a fly in the web, and surrounded by men in the pay of the Three King-pins."

He was suddenly answered by a footstep, and the door opened to reveal between him and the sun the graceful figure of Irma.

The girl had come to him with a white face and anxious look. She stood in the doorway, looking at him like one half frightened and minus the powers of speech.

"They have a new high sheriff," said Oscar.

"It is Derringer Dick. I wonder how they selected him?"

"That is one of the secrets of the Triad. Derringer will serve his masters as well as Dagon did."

"A new man has just come in."

"Another one, Irma?"

"Yes. He came down the mountain and passed my house. He is a singular looking man and carries one hand along his side as if it was crippled," and Irma proceeded and gave Oscar a word photograph of Julius, the new comer.

"That man may be but a mountain tramp, and he may play an important part in coming events," said the youth, thinking again of his interview with Silk Ribbon. "I am prepared for anything now."

The girl looked from the window and then came toward him.

"The court will convene ere long. Are you going?" she asked.

"Why should I go? You know that they forced me to remain in camp and they might not like to have me there."

"I know that. They would not let you go, but it might be policy to be present."

"It will be a dark and sanguinary farc

They will condemn Mountain Morg, no difference what proof they have. I doubt if they have any. The Piute Pansy never killed the woman. He never saw her before last night."

"I won't say that," remarked Irma. "He is a rolling stone and may have seen her somewhere. But as to killing her in cold blood—he never did that, Oscar."

"What has become of Jason, so-called—the man who came last night on the roan?"

"He was standing in front of his door as I came by. He is a handsome sport and already, as you know, hand-in-glove with the Three Captains."

"It is strange to me."

"What is?"

"I don't know how to take that man. I have seen more of him than you have, Irma, and to me he is a mystery which I cannot solve."

"He will be there. He will see the work of the Tribunal."

"But he will not try to save Mountain Morg from the grip of the Triad."

"Why should he?" quickly asked Irma. "Men nowadays look after number one, and we know that if he interfered his life would not be worth a fly's in a spider's web."

Oscar was silent.

He felt the force of the girl's words. He knew that no man could cope single-handed with the Three King-pins of Crossbar. He knew also that an attempt to rescue Mountain Morg from the hands of his enemies would result in failure and perhaps in the death of the would-be rescuer on the very spot of the attempted rescue.

The sun mounted higher and higher.

Presently there rung through the camp three shots in quick succession and Oscar gave Irma a look which the girl understood.

"That means that the time has come for the Triad Court to open."

They went to the window and caught a glimpse of the shanty to which the Piute Pansy had been conducted after his arrest.

The door of the cabin opened as they looked, and forth came the tall man from Nowhere.

Mountain Morg had about him nothing of the look of the coward.

He walked erect with his dark face revealing none of his thoughts, and as he was surrounded by half a dozen men, as tall and dark as himself, the young pair could not help remarking on his bearing.

"The victim of the Triad Court," said Irma. "That man is capable of facing a den of lions."

"Well, the den and the lions are yonder," was the reply. "I am going down."

Oscar started toward the door and had opened it when the hand of the Crossbar's Seraph touched his arm.

"Do nothing rash. They may do something there to rouse your blood. They may provoke and render you an easy victim to follow the man marching out there to his doom."

"I will remain!" was the answer. "I will stay here and if they want me at the bar of injustice, they will notify me."

A smile of satisfaction stole over Irma's face and Mountain Morg and his guards passed out of sight.

Ten minutes waned. The morning breeze came in at the door which stood ajar, and touched the white but beautiful cheeks of Irma, giving them for a moment a hue of health.

All at once a heavy tread fell upon their ears.

"They have come for us," cried she. "The slaves of the Three Captains are at the door."

In another moment the portal swung inward and as the girl sprang up, she caught sight of the tall figure of Derringer Dick at the threshold.

"Are we wanted at court?" asked Irma.

"You are not, miss, but Oscar is."

"I thought so," said the youth. "I thought you would disturb us and that the Three King-pins would want me there."

He stepped toward the door and the hand of Irma seized his a moment.

"Do nothing rash. Let the blame of what happens fall upon their shoulders," she spoke in a hasty whisper which did not reach the ears of the sheriff.

He looked down at her and crossed the step.

Derringer Dick ran his hand beneath the youth's blouse and then said with a smile:

"You've got one about you, boy. It would be better if you left it off."

"No, it is mine and all men carry revolvers hyer. I will take mine along!"

The high sheriff said no more and they walked away.

Left behind, the girl for half a minute stood at the door with her lips strangely welded and her eyes lighted up with a keen flash.

She saw the vanishing figures of Derringer Dick and Oscar and at last fell back to the table.

"They want his blood. It was by their orders that he was shot through the wrist. He is their enemy because they have made him such. The lions will show their teeth at court. They will find means for condemning him with Mountain Morg."

Meantime Oscar and the new high sheriff of Crossbar were nearing the Green Paradise where numbers had already congregated and under whose rafters stood more than one interested spectator of what was to come.

Lounging in front of the place might have been seen the last man to enter the gold camp—Julius, of the Blasted Hand, but who called himself when alone, Sol Solstice, the suspected slayer of Dagon.

With the crippled hand hanging useless at his side and his gray eyes taking in everything in sight, he looked around and was among the first to see Derringer Dick and Oscar approaching.

"Jehosaphat! war they holding back for the boy?" he inwardly exclaimed. "Why, they'll make short work of him if they take a notion. I would like to have the young one's ear for half a second, but they won't let me have it at all."

Sol Solstice moved a pace and stood still once more.

He turned after Oscar as the youth passed into the saloon and was seen by all assembled there.

"Mountain Morg is as cool as a cucumber!" said Sol. "That man has the courage of a tiger and nothing frightens him. Why, his life ain't worth shucks among these vultures. They'll delight in taking him out and shooting the feathers off him. They'll do worse than that before sundown if nothing balks them."

Sol watched the proceedings while the court, not yet formally opened, was a busy hive.

The Three King pins were still absent and as the moments went by the impatience of the crowd grew more pointed and the drinks more frequent.

An hour passed.

At last the figure of one of the Three appeared at the door and the hum of conversation ceased.

It was Leo.

As he came forward every hat was doffed and Sol Solstice showed his cropped hair to all.

The prisoner will be taken back to the shanty! Leon is missing and has been for an hour! This court cannot proceed without a full complement of officers!"

Leon missing!

Here was the unexpected; here was something truly startling and from the look that came to Leo's face while he spoke all saw that it was a serious matter.

"Take the prisoner back and guard him closer than ever, Mr. Sheriff," continued Leo, covering the Pansy with his hand, "we will find Leon first and then with the hand of eternal justice crush the conspiracy!"

A hand was laid upon Mountain Morg's arm and he looked down at Oscar as that youth passed him with a face that spoke volumes.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MISSING KING-PIN.

"LEON is missing!"

Leo, the King-pin, said this fifty times to those who crowded about him as the Piute Pansy was led back to the shanty.

It meant a great deal those times.

Leo went back home, leaving the crowd in doubt as to the real extent of the situation,

and crossing the step came face to face with Lionel.

"I have dismissed the court," he said. "I have ordered the prisoner back to jail. We will now take another look."

They had locked the doors of the house of the Triad and Lionel opened the trap-door in the floor. Armed to the teeth, and bearing a lantern, they went down the ladder and stood in a short time under ground.

They went direct to the little room where Leon had prepared in secrecy the papers against Mountain Morg, and beyond it. The corridors of the subterranean house were narrow and tortuous. They ran hither and thither like the passages of a labyrinth, but though they seemed puzzling, they were not so to the brothers.

Lionel's torch threw its light down the passages, and Leo went ahead with a cocked revolver in his brown hand and his eyes searching every spot.

"It gets deeper and deeper, eh?" said Lionel, looking at Leo whose figure was seen at every stage of the proceedings. "I don't see into it."

"We will go further. We will lower ourselves into the bottomless pit—"

"You don't expect to find him there, do you?" broke in the man with the torch.

"I am prepared for anything."

On, on they went, until Leo, falling back, turned upon Lionel and pointed forward.

"We have reached the critical stage of the hunt. The trail we have traveled ends here, and there is the brink of the pit."

"But what would bring him to this place of his own free will? I know it is said that a trail leads from the bottom of the pit—it is not 'bottomless,' you know, though called so—to the mountain outside. Leon said ere he left me that if he thought the child was alive, he would take the trail."

"But who is capable of telling him where to strike the trail?"

"Ay, who but the man called Jason?"

"Then, we will go back and choke it out of him!"

"No, this trail first. We will see what is here for us and if we discover that Leon is off on the child's trail, we will go back and open the Triad Court to the detriment of somebody's life and happiness."

The King-pin who listened to these words uncoiled from his belt a lasso, one end of which he dropped over the edge of the precipice at their feet.

"I will go down. It is an unused trail, but Leon may have taken it through a whim."

Leo turned to his brother and then lowered himself over the edge of the rock.

Lionel watched him descend in the light of the torch and when he was lost to sight the oscillations of the rope told him where he was.

Down, down through the dark went the body of the youngest of the Three Captains. Leo reached the ground and tried to penetrate the darkness that hemmed him in.

He made a trumpet of his hands and shouted up to Lionel that he had found the bottom of the pit.

After this Leo struck a match and held the flame above his head. He stooped and ran the fire over the ground.

All at once he started and then looked again. There in the dust beneath him was the unmistakable print of a human foot, and as he moved forward in a stooping posture, he looked as it led him across the pit.

"I have found a footprint!" he called to the anxious man overhead. "I think he came this way."

Lionel heard this in an uncertain way and listened again.

Leo went on and on, crossing the "bottomless pit," and going along a wall with the footprint leading him into an unknown region.

Suddenly he stopped and held his torch high above his head.

"I was never here before," he said, audibly. "I have never penetrated to this spot, yet Leon seems to have gone beyond it. He must have come down here when we knew it not. If a trail leads to the mountains he knew where to find it."

There were strange marks on the walls of stone and Leo, out of curiosity, moved his light so as to see them as they appeared. He was standing on what seemed a narrow

ledge, a wall of dark-gray stone overhead and an offset under foot.

A sound came to him from somewhere. He turned his head to hear more of it, but lost it altogether.

Suddenly Leo saw something which was not the wall and the bowlders at its feet.

Out of the gloom came the figure of a man, and as he smothered the light of his torch for a moment he discovered that he had seen some one destined to give him trouble.

It was not Leon.

Leo stood thus for some time, wondering if he had been seen, and when the person thus discovered came on with a light above his head, the King-pin of Crossbar drew his revolver and leaned forward in his mad eagerness for a shot.

"Halt!"

In an instant the person seen became as rigid as a statue and Leo of Crossbar felt a cold feeling run through his veins as he thought that perhaps the accursed pit was haunted.

He looked at the man and then raised a revolver.

"Come on!" he said. "Come on and give an account of yourself or I will sent a bullet through your head."

The command was not heeded; the man addressed looked at him with flashing eyes, rendered so by the light shining like a star amid the prevailing gloom, and Leo fired straight at the target.

As the report seemed to shake the wall against which he leaned and the smoke curled up he leaned forward to note the result of the shot.

To his horror the man had not moved.

"Man, ghost or demon?" cried the King-pin of Crossbar, as he stood trembling for the first time for years. "I aimed at the breast and we can't be twenty yards apart. I'll try again."

Quick as a flash the deadly weapon in the hand of the Son of the Triad went up once more and a second shot rung out as clearly as the first.

Leo with a curse saw the result of the second shot and to his astonishment the target stood as before looking more ghostly in the underground light.

Leo fell back, almost dropping the weapon and glanced at the apparition.

It seemed to advance.

Clutching the wall for a support, the young King-pin of Crossbar went back over the ground he had traversed. He reached the "bottomless pit" and finding the dangling rope, was about to grasp it for the purpose of signaling Lionel, when he felt something alight at his side and Lionel was there.

The brothers stood in the darkness and Leo in hasty sentences told Lionel what had happened.

"It may be the old ghost," said the elder brother.

"The old ghost?"

"Yes, the one they say haunts the lower part of the mine."

"I never heard of it," cried Leo.

"Never mind it now. You shot twice at it, eh?"

"Twice."

"Did it advance?"

"I thought it did."

"You do not know. Come, we will go and see."

But Leo did not move. Lionel started down the ledge, but the hand of the other seized him and suddenly pulled him back.

"Let the ghost inhabit the mine," said he.

"Leon will not be found here. We will find him elsewhere for he will send word back. If he has gone after Grace's child we will hear of him. There is work for us above. The Triad must throttle its enemies. They are gathering and in Crossbar! Think of the man in the cabin and he who brought to the camp the gold cross! Come! We must go back."

Lionel, who had thrown his match above his head and was holding it there while he looked down the ledge, turned slowly to his brother and said:

"No, this mystery first. We must know who lives in this cavern. It is our mine, and, ghost or devil, he must give an account of himself. We go on!"

They went on side by side and suddenly Lionel halted and pointed forward.

"Look! There stands your ghost!"

Leo craned his neck forward and gazed at the object the other had pointed out.

"Tis he!" he exclaimed. "He is standing where I fired at him. I will try again!"

But Lionel would not hear to this and they advanced upon the man, their weapons covering him as they did so.

"This man is dead!" cried Lionel stopping suddenly and holding the light in the white face before them.

"My God! it is true. He is dead!"

Against the wall, as if bracing himself, stood the object of their search, his eyes staring into vacancy and his long skeleton-like hand clinched as if in the death-agony.

"Heavens!" he's been dead for years!" cried Leo.

"For centuries perhaps!" was Lionel's retort, as he touched the waxy flesh and felt a chill of horror sweep through his body. "See! he wears no shoes and the foot-prints you saw were clothed, weren't they."

"They were the marks of boots. They belonged to Leon, such was my first thought, at any rate. But, as you say, this man is barefooted and his feet are skeleton ones."

Shuddering as they gazed at the terrible spectacle, the two brothers looked more closely and discovered that the preserved corpse must have been there for years, and a careful examination of the ground at the ghastly feet showed them fresh foot-prints as if some human had passed the terror in the dark.

"Leon never saw this silent denizen of the cavern," said Leo. "He passed the dead and never dreamed of its ghastly presence. Come! Let us go on and follow Leon."

They gave the guardian of the lower mine a wide berth and passed on.

Deeper and deeper into the unknown they went, nor paused again until Lionel turned to his companion and thrust the torch almost into his face.

"We go no further!" cried he. "Something tells me that we are needed at Crossbar."

"Back, then! Back to settle with the enemies we have there, both open and secret, and then once more to the trail which leads to our missing brother."

It was retreat now.

They passed the dead once more, Lionel holding his torch close to the ghastly face and looking into the sightless sockets which Leo in his trepidation thought were provided with keen eyes, and so on to the rope.

They drew themselves up to the main corridor and ran along the passage to the trap-door of the House of the Triad.

Lionel, in the lead, opened the trap and sprang into the room overhead.

Something had happened in camp.

They were told so by the face of the person who awaited them in the room of the hidden painting.

The new high sheriff of Crossbar was there, and the moment he saw the two King-pins he started forward and cried out:

"Somebody has stolen Dagon's head! If this is to be the fate of high sheriffs, I resign my office now."

The brothers looked at the speaker, and Derringer Dick repeated with another oath that he was no longer sheriff of Crossbar.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TWO AVENGERS.

STARTLING as was the message delivered by Derringer Dick to the two King-pins, it was nevertheless true.

Some one had stolen Dagon's head and that apparently in broad daylight. Some one had sneaked to the cabin where lay the dead and deliberately cut off the head and carried it away.

If such was to be the fate of the high sheriffs of Crossbar no wonder that the last one wanted to resign. He did not care about having his head stolen even after death, and with a shudder he related to Leo and Lionel all he knew about the theft, which was not much.

Ten minutes later the whole camp seemed gathered in front of the Green Paradise and there was a quiet but terrible determination to sift this new mystery to the bottom and find, not only the missing head, but the thief, as well.

Looking on, apparently deeply interested

in the proceedings, stood two men—Julius of the Blasted Hand and Silk Ribbon Sam.

The latter had seen the breaking up of the Triad Court just when it was about to finish Mountain Morg's career and the other had witnessed the same scene.

With steady tramp and stern faces the two brothers came to the spot and for a moment gazed at the headless trunk of Dagon which had been carried to the place where it lay on a blanket covered with a dirty sheet.

"This outrage shall be avenged," said Lionel. "The hand of justice shall overtake the person who did this, and that soon. Men of Crossbar, we will bring him to light and in a terrible way punish the thief who will not leave the dead alone."

A murmur of applause, swelling at last into a cheer, rose from many lips and the brothers turned and walked away.

Some one picked up the body and it was carried back, to be laid beneath the stones of the mountains with a solemn promise that not only the missing head but the head of the thief should repose beside it in the near future.

Silk Ribbon Sam turned away and at that moment caught the eye of the Blasted Hand.

The two men were close together when they looked into each other's face and for half a second it seemed as though they would speak.

But Julius turned to one side and passed on, followed for a little time by the eye of the Silk Ribbon.

"I don't think he knows me," said Julius, *alias* Sol Solstice, to himself. "It will not do now with my game half played out. I will go on till I have thrown down the last card. Then— Ah! then they may unmask me; but it shall not be done a moment before."

He appeared as cool as when he saw the painting in the House of the Triad suddenly revealed to him by the hand of Leon. He had looked into the face of the King-pin of Crossbar, saying that it was "the old desert to a T" and had asked the King-pin if he had painted it.

Julius passed to his shanty and shut the door behind him. He stood near the window and looked out, showing his face for a little while to the light and over it passed a strange smile.

What was this man's mission? What had brought him back in this singular disguise?

All at once a shadow fell across his face and he fell back as the door opened and he saw standing at the threshold the man into whose eyes he had just looked.

Silk Ribbon Sam!

The tall man came in, shutting the door, and then taking a chair as he gazed into the Blasted Hand's face.

"It's a cool game, this one of yours," said Silk Ribbon.

Julius started.

"I never saw anything like it, but, then, you were always noted for dare-devil things, and this is in keeping with your previous record."

The Blasted Hand seemed to feel for something that rested on his hip, but, as his movement was followed by Silk Ribbon's eye, he removed his hand and said:

"You seem to take me at a disadvantage. I can't say that I know you."

"You don't eh? You don't know me, and yet you have been studying me ever since you landed in Crossbar. You are here to baffle me. Come, man, admit this."

"You are positive."

"I know what I am talking about."

"Ah, do you? Well, you are in the shadow yourself, it seems to me, and the lifting of your hand would seal your fate and turn you over to the tender mercies of the Triad Court."

There was no reply to this, the face of Silk Ribbon Sam watching the speaker and seeming to wonder what made him so cool.

"You stole that head!" he said, still watching Julius.

"I?"

"You stole that head, I say! Heaven knows how you did it, but it was your work."

Not a muscle moved and the Blasted Hand continued to regard Sam with looks of surprise.

"Is it in this house? Have you concealed it here? If you have, its discovery is but a question of time, for don't you know that they will search this shanty and bring it to light? You can't escape suspicion, though, as yet, they don't suspect that you are Sol Solstice, the man accused of killing the high sheriff."

"Do you know I am that person?"

"Of course I do. The moment I looked into your eyes I knew it. You may deceive these men for a time, but you can't hoodwink me. I am here for a purpose."

"I understand. You are here to unearth a certain mystery. You are the avenger of an old crime and you think you are on the right trail. You come to Crossbar with a hand ungloved; you are here to play out a hand which, if successful, will make you a noted man in this country. I know you, Silk Ribbon Sam, as they call you here. These men, as yet, do not believe that you are the dread detective of the Southwest—they don't suspect you, else you wouldn't be here talking to me in this shanty. Your life wouldn't be worth a breath if they thought you were on the old trail which long ago led across the desert. You have seen the picture, I suppose."

The detective smiled.

"So have I," continued Julius. "I have looked at the waste of sand and sky. I have gazed at the woman lying dead on the sand until my blood coursed like lava floods through my veins and when I looked from it into the eyes of the man who held the curtain aside I felt like jumping, tiger-like, at his throat and sprinkling the painting with his life blood."

"You hate the King-pins, eh?"

"Hate them?" and Julius clinched his hands. "I could devour them alive!"

"You are mad. Your madness will open a trap for you and you will become its only victim."

The hand of Silk Ribbon Sam fell lightly upon the listener's shoulder and Julius looked up into the face that bent over him.

"You can't frighten me off that way," he cried. "I am here to stay to the close of the drama."

"And here to come between me and my rights?"

"I have not said so, but that will be as you make it. If you interfere with me, I shall act accordingly."

"And lose everything for both of us! We can't win and fight one another. The head must go back to its dead owner."

The Blasted Hand started and for a moment seemed to shrink within himself.

"It is in this house, I say. You are the thief of the head and if it is found here all your cunning and your strength will not save you a minute from the Court of Crossbar."

Julius went to one corner of the shanty and stooped there. He was followed by the eyes of Silk Ribbon Sam and when he lifted a plank and raised something ghastly in one hand, the man from Nowhere fell back and after a hasty glance at the door went toward him and looked at the object.

"I thought so! Put it away till a favorable opportunity," said Sam. "The head of this man will get you into deadly peril if it is found here. In Heaven's name, what did you take it for?"

"Just to show them that a mystery was in camp—a mystery dread enough to chill their blood, hot as it is. I am here! I, the man, who was struck by the Three King-pins years ago."

"I understand you."

"You shall not beat me to the goal. Don't you know what Leo said when he came into court? Leon is missing. The second brother of the Triad had vanished as if the mountain had opened and swallowed him. They have remanded Mountain Morg back to his shanty and his guards will watch him as well as ever. They have prevented the boy, Oscar, from quitting camp and the girl— Look here, Silk Ribbon. Do you know that she is beautiful?"

"She is good-looking," said the detective. "I haven't made a study of her beauty for that is not my mission to this camp."

"No, your mission is to wipe out of existence the Triad Court by removing its masters. I know that. The woman who

rode across the desert is to be avenged by your hand."

"You are right. She is to be avenged by me!"

"Listen. You may find more than one barrier between you and success. You sent ahead your pardner, Mountain Morg, and his first act was to fall into the hands of the enemy. He is now under sentence of death and the Triad Court will soon swing him up to the tree out yonder. Mountain Morg is suspected of taking the life of the woman who died in the tenth shanty, but he didn't do it."

"That is true. He never took that life."

"But they will hang him for that crime unless you play a hand of rescue."

"Mountain Morg is still in the land of the living," said Silk Ribbon with a smile.

"He may escape the noose of the Triad—"

"Or his master may feel it with him, eh?" laughed Julius.

"Let the future answer that question."

"Look here!" cried the Blasted Hand. "This hand settles my identity in this camp. I am the last survivor of the small-pox smitten camp among the hills. I have the scars of Julius of the Blasted Hand—I have the hand itself. It settles my identity, I tell you, and when you talk about my falling into the death-trap here you talk without reason. Here I am secure—as secure as any one could be at home."

"Then play a cooler hand. Make no blunders like the one you have just made. That head yonder must go back to the grave in the mountain, or you may go headless yourself to a buzzard feast."

Julius only laughed.

"You are mad. You have come out on this vengeance hunt without your head. You may wear your mask well for a time, but such acts will tear it off and the Triad Court will deal with you. Be cool and sensible."

"Be cool yourself," was the retort. "Look out for number one or you will feel the rope of the Three King pins!"

Silk Ribbon Sam drew to the door and looked back at the man who eyed him closely.

"There need not be war between us," he said. "We know each other—we carry in our bosoms each other's secret."

"I shall play the hand that suits me here. I will not make any promises. I am here for a purpose. I have lived in hopes of this time and it has come. I am Julius to these men, but to the world and to my recorded oath I am a different person."

The door shut and the figure of Silk Ribbon crossed the step. He was watched as far as Sol Solstice could see him and when he vanished the Blasted Hand struck the table with his fist.

"He is in my way. That man on the trail of vengeance will baffle me if he can. Indeed, if he wins I lose; if he carries out his oath mine will fall to the ground unfulfilled. It must not be thus. And yet he carries my secret in his bosom. He knows that I am Sol Solstice, the oath-bound. He knows that I am here to baffle him, for both of us can't succeed."

He stopped suddenly and looked from the window.

"Maybe I did make a mistake when I took the head. It shall go back to its owner. It shall be restored, but after that I will play a hand that will startle the whole camp and strike terror to the hearts of every wretch in Crossbar."

The man's eyes got a deep flash; they seemed on fire, and when he fell back from the window he stood like a statue in the middle of the room with the face of a demon in the sunlight.

Was Sol Solstice mad?

CHAPTER XVII.

IRMA LOOKS AT THE TERROR.

IRMA, the Seraph of Crossbar, was troubled. To her the toils were tightening around Oscar, her young friend and lover, and she saw in the sudden ending of the first session of the Triad Court more trouble for him.

That he had been summoned to the scene by the Three King-pins was enough to convince her that the hand of fate was closing in on him and that he was in the toils as surely as was Mountain Morg.

For some time he had been under the ban

of the dread Tribunal. His shot through the wrist in the dark was in her mind proof of this, and while she helped him nurse the wounded member, she tried to draw from him a secret which he kept from her with a good deal of care.

She had not for a moment forgotten the face she had seen in the tenth shanty—the face of the strange woman found dead there by Mountain Morg whose first act was to seek her out and guide her to the spot that she might have forever before her eyes the white face of the Unknown.

When the court suddenly ended and she saw Oscar walk back over the ground, her heart took for a moment a leap for joy, but very soon it sunk back into the depths of despair.

She wondered what had taken place, but in a little while she learned that Leon was missing and that the court had been adjourned on this account.

After her interview with Oscar following the events we have recorded, Irma might have been seen making her way to a house she had not entered for a long time.

The House of the Triad was a mystery to her as it was the home of the Three King-pins and she had not crossed its threshold for months.

But now, with determination to bear her company, she was making her way to its strange precincts and was about to invade the den of the lion on a mission which might terminate fatally for herself as well as for those in whose fortunes she was interested.

In response to Irma's knock the door opened and she found herself in the house.

The face of Lionel was there to greet her, showing none of the excitement which had attended the underground hunt for Leon when he and Leo came across the dead man in the corridor.

The girl was conducted to the chamber where the curtain concealed the painting of death on the desert, and Lionel, pointing to a chair, bade her be seated.

There was something half pitying in the expression that sat on the King-pin's face.

His lips falling apart were not the stern ones which Irma had seen welded by resolution on more than one occasion, and while she looked into his eyes she thought they softened, but that may have been a delusion.

Lionel watched the white face of the young girl for a time and then said:

"You have sought me for a purpose today. What is it, Irma?"

His voice encouraged her.

"I come in behalf of one who is my friend and he has not sent me either. I am here to ask permission from you to let Oscar leave camp. He wants to go. He is anxious to get away for a spell, and I promise that upon the issuance of your mandate he will come back."

Lionel smiled.

"Then, why go away at all?" he asked. "Oscar need not go at all. He belongs to Crossbar."

"That is true, but he has enemies here. He has received notice of that through the medium of a bullet. The shot in the wrist from the ambush tells him this."

"It was almost a miss. He was barely winged, miss, showing that the person who fired the shot is a poor marksman. The wound will heal here as quickly as elsewhere and we may need him where he is sooner than he suspects."

There was a deep meaning to the last words and Irma recognized this by a slight start.

"You will not let him go, then? You intend to keep him in Crossbar?"

"Oscar must remain where he is!"

Suddenly a noise in another part of the house left Irma alone and the sound of footsteps died away with the shutting of the door.

She looked about her with more care than she had done before. She saw the dark drape which seemed to hide something on the wall and the longer she looked the greater grew her curiosity.

Her hands itched to lift just one corner of the curtain and get a glimpse of what was beyond.

She saw the folds of the dark cloth, and wondered if the terrible picture, of which she had heard something, was still there for her to look at with distended eyes.

Lionel did not come back and the moments seemed to grow into hours.

Irma moved at last and it was toward the painting.

She crept across the chamber, making no noise on the floor, and at last stood before the curtain.

"I will take a look at it," she said in inaudible tones. "I will see for myself and look at the picture which one time drove Oscar's blood hot through his veins."

Her fingers touched the cloth and she slowly lifted it. It was heavy for the bottom was weighted, and her strength was taxed to raise it sufficiently.

All at once a cry welled from the girl's throat.

She was looking at the painted waste of sand and sky. She saw the scattered cacti as they threw their shadows over the white sand and caught sight of the winged scourges that hovered over their fainting prey.

It was a terrible picture sure enough.

Irma stood spell-bound as it were, holding up the curtain while she drank in that scene which she had never seen before.

The brush of the artist must have been inspired as it swept across the canvas, making it more than real in every particular. The sun seemed to burn her hand as it beat upon the sand; she seemed to hear the blood as it trickled from the neck of the black steed to the fevered lips of the victim of nature's vengeance. She seemed to see the shadows of vulture wings as they moved hither and thither as natural as life, and the whole scene was so terribly real that Irma forgot her situation and stood before the painting and looked with her eyes starting from her head in amazement and terror.

She must have looked for ten minutes at the desert and its victims.

She took no heed of time as it flew by amid the dead silence of the Triad House; she looked and looked, drinking in the horrors of the scene, and feeling in her heart the despair which was visible on the white face of the woman beside the steed.

"It is terrible! It is horrible! Can it have been true? Did she perish where the picture paints her? Who was she and why is this painting in this house?"

The curtain slid from her hands and she fell back to the chair.

Nerve was gone and her own face was blanched.

She sat there staring at the curtain as if she could see beyond it and review the terrible limner's brush.

Irma had been more than satisfied. She would have given a world if she had not raised that curtain; she would have remained from that house if she had thought she was destined by entering it to look at the forbidden.

Oscar had told her something about the painting, but the half had not been revealed.

For some time she sat there trying to recover from the effects of her curiosity.

Irma breathed hard and at last arose and went to the door.

"This is an accursed place," she cried. "What if Captain Lionel went out just to let me see that painting alone? What if he left me here to give me a chance to see what others, even men, have shuddered at? I will not wait for him, for he will know by my face that I have seen it, and I cannot face him now."

She touched the door, when it opened in her face, and she recoiled with a cry, for Lionel again stood before her.

The head brother of the Triad came forward with a smile on his face and Irma with a glance at the wall went to the chair and dropped into it without a command.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," said he. "I trust you have enjoyed yourself."

Had she? No.

The terror of the scene on the desert was still upon her. She betrayed it by another look toward the curtained wall.

Irma felt that she must know more. She could not keep back the impulse which drove to her lips the startling question which parted them as she sprang almost tiger-like at Lionel, and seizing his hand, cried out:

"I could not help it. I lifted the curtain and saw the terrible picture. I saw the woman drinking the blood from her steed's neck—I saw the swooping vultures and the pitiless sky. I made out the trail the dying

horse made in the sand. What brush did that? Who painted that awful scene and did she perish there?"

Irma was all excitement again, but it was of a different kind from that which controlled her while she gazed at the picture. She seemed to sink her hand into Lionel's flesh and her eyes did not leave him while she spoke.

"Do you really want to know these things?" he said, looking down at her face, now stern again without the semblance of a smile at the lips.

"I do! I do!" cried Irma. "I want to know if the hot blood from her steed's veins saved the life of that woman."

"Look for yourself. What do you think?"

Lionel had stepped to the wall and lifted the curtain, and once more Irma was gazing at the painting.

"Come nearer," said Lionel, the King-pin. "You can't see from there. It takes a near view to catch the real expression on that face and that painting is true to life—and death!"

She drew nearer. She almost touched the wall as she leaned toward the canvas. She felt that her breath was falling on the sand of the desert and helping to scorch it with the burning sun overhead.

Lionel watched her with coolness and intensity. He never took his eyes from her face, and while she took in the white countenance beside the black steed's neck, seeing more now than she had seen before he appeared to regard her with a look which came suddenly to his dark, all-seeing eyes.

"I see! I see!" cried Irma. "She is dead now."

The Seraph of Crossbar crossed her hands and fell back, her face as bloodless as the one on the canvas and her limbs weak and tottering.

The curtain fell again and Lionel stepped toward Irma as she shuddered near the table.

"You have seen the truth without asking the question. You need not ask me what became of the woman on the desert."

"No, no! She perished there. The artist saw her dead by her steed."

A faint smile came to the face of the King-pin of Crossbar; he seemed to unclasp the hands till then shut tightly and the next moment he was leaning over Irma with his eyes almost touching her in their blazing.

"Dead? Do you think we would leave her in any other condition there?"

"You? Then it was your work? Then you had that picture painted? It may have been painted by your own hand!"

Lionel suddenly held out his hand and showed it ungloved to the terrified girl.

"Behold the hand of the artist!" he cried. "Behold, girl, the hand that transferred to canvas the last agonies of the enemy of our race. My hand did it. I painted the waste and the sky, the steed and his dying rider. *I painted it as it was!*"

Irma went back from the face of Lionel.

"It must have been murder then!" she cried. "It must have been vengeance for a purpose. It was man against a helpless woman."

"It was—man against a helpless woman! But she was the enemy of our race. She deserved what she got for the name she bore. And when Leon has found her child, there will hang some day alongside that picture a companion piece just as terrible."

A low cry came from the throat of the trembling girl. The table which she touched seemed to recede from her; she fell back another pace and then slid to the floor where she lay in a dead faint at the feet of Lionel, the King-pin.

"I didn't expect to strike her so hard," was all he said as he looked down into the white face upturned to his stern, black eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FORCED INTO EXILE.

IRMA was never able to tell just how she reached her abode after her startling interview with Lionel, the King-pin.

That she got home she well knew, for she saw the neat walls of the little shanty and

found herself at the window looking toward Oscar's home.

Presently the door of the young man's cabin opened and she saw him come forth.

The day was waning and the sun, sinking toward the West, was throwing long shadows on street and Plaza.

The stern Court of Crossbar had not been reconvened; the voice of Derringer Dick had not proclaimed another session and the pards of the gold-camp were at their usual games within the walls of the Green Paradise.

Leon was still missing and Irma was thinking of the sport while she stood at the window wondering if the last scenes in the drama had had anything to do with his vanishment.

As for Oscar, should she tell him about the interview at the House of the Triad—an interview fresh in her mind? She was at a loss how to act. She had seen the painting on the wall and had heard Lionel proclaim himself the artist. She had fallen in a faint at his feet and in some manner had come home to recall these events and to wonder when they would be explained to all.

Oscar came toward the house, but suddenly, as if guided by another impulse, turned and went back.

Irma was springing to the door to call him when she saw reach the Plaza a man whom she well knew.

Lionel was there—Lionel, the man into whose face she had lately looked and from whose lips she had heard the confession.

He looked across the Plaza and saw Oscar.

In another instant, revolver in hand, the man of Crossbar advanced and Irma heard his voice as it halted the young man.

Oscar, looking into Lionel's face, stopped and seemed to see the weapon he held along his limb.

"Hands up!" cried Lionel.

The youth wondering what was about to happen threw up his one good hand, the other remaining in the sling, and confronted the King-pin with his figure drawn to its true height.

"Heavens! there is murder in the madman's eye!" cried Irma. "Lionel intends to kill Oscar in cold blood."

All at once the revolver went up and covered the young man. It was aimed at him in the light of the sinking sun and its gleams fell along the barrel.

"Come to me!" sternly said Lionel.

Oscar obeyed.

Walking forward, he looked the giant in the eye and halted within a few paces of the weapon.

"You can go," said Lionel. "You shall quit Crossbar within twenty minutes never to return."

These words seemed to stagger Oscar.

"This is banishment," he answered.

"It is banishment, it is perpetual exile. You will never, on pain of death, set foot again in Crossbar."

"You have changed your mind. I have been refused permission to quit camp and now you suddenly and unexpectedly grant that privilege. I do not want to go now."

"Not want to go?" cried Lionel. "Why, yesterday you wanted to get away at once. Not want to go now? Young man, you may not be safe here."

Oscar was thinking rapidly.

"I do not want to go. I will remain."

"And take the risks?"

"And take all the risks."

"You shall not do this. You have been banished. This is exile and you are free to go."

Irma, listening at the open door of her little home with strained ears, heard some of these words, enough, at least, to catch the drift of the interview, and she lost color while she listened.

"They have banished him and he will not go," she said. "The Triad Court is at work and Oscar will feel its hand if he refuses to obey."

"You shall choose between voluntary exit or exit under guard," exclaimed Lionel. "You will be granted twenty minutes, and if at the end of that time you remain among us, you will be escorted out of camp with the admonition I have given you ringing in your ears."

Oscar turned and walked back.

"I will remain!" said he. "I will not go now. This banishment comes at a time when I believe it to be my duty to stay here. It comes when Irma may be in danger, and I will not go."

He shut the door of his cabin behind him and looked from the window upon the Plaza.

For half a second he watched the setting sun, as if it was telling off the most momentous minutes of his career, and when he turned toward the far side of the room, it was with an expression which was a challenge to the Three Captains of Crossbar.

The door opened and he turned to see there the girl he would have taken with him if his exile was to be perpetual.

"I know what has happened," cried Irma. "You have been banished and I will go with you."

"You?"

He went toward her, but stopped short, looking at her as she smiled and put out her hand.

"We will find a better home than this," she went on. "I will go with you and far beyond the pards of this tiger den we will be happy without being molested."

"But you have been happy here."

"That day is gone. I have been to the House of the Triad. I have seen the painting of death in the desert, and from that moment I wanted to flee—to get beyond the hand that painted that terrible scene. I am ready."

He found her inexorable; he saw by the eyes that looked into his that he could not put this girl aside and go without her. She had come to share his fortunes, and yet the promises of two hearts had never passed between them.

"They won't let you go," he said at last.

"They shall!" flashed the girl.

"You forget, Irma, that these men rule this camp with a rod of steel."

"I forget nothing. I will never forget that they are the czars of Crossbar—that I am still under their hands; but we will go for all that."

They talked for some time in the cabin and the sun creeping lower and lower passed the twenty minute point, and Oscar, looking out, at length heard the tramp of men as they drew near.

His face blanched suddenly.

"They are out there," cried Irma. "The guard has come. They are to escort us from Crossbar. Oh, Oscar, we will be happy beyond this tiger den among the mountains."

"But they won't let you go, I say."

"I will go anyhow!"

The door opened by Oscar showed the pair six men in dark shirts, bronzed faces and armed to the teeth.

At their head stood Derringer Dick who had reconsidered his resolution to resign as high sheriff of the gold-camp. They faced the young couple, and Irma, taking Oscar's hand, said as she looked at the pards:

"You have come to conduct us from camp, have you? Well, we are ready. Do your master's duty, men of Crossbar."

The men looked at their leader and then at one another.

"We can't take two," said Derringer Dick. "Why, that's ag'in' orders. We war to take but one, and that one the young man, Oscar."

"I know, but we are going into exile together."

"It can't be done that way. The orders don't read that way. You will have to stay, miss."

Derringer Dick looked perplexed when he saw himself confronted by the puzzling predicament.

"You will be better off with two out of the camp than with one," continued Irma. "There won't be so many mouths to feed, and, besides, I am tired of the place and want a change of scene."

She could have emphasized her words by adding a few more, but refrained and awaited the high sheriff's answer.

"Come, boy," Dick said, putting out his hand to Oscar. "You are the only one what's going out o' camp just now."

The crowd surged forward and the hand of Irma was gently seized by one of the pards, when at the touch she broke away, and in an instant she stood erect with a revolver in her hand.

"There shall be two exiles!" she said, coolly. "I am going if Oscar goes. You will take both of us to the line. We will manage to take care of ourselves after that."

The men stopped again.

Derringer Dick turned to his nearest companion and said something which sent that person toward the Plaza and they saw him run up to the door of the Triad House.

It was a message to Lionel—a message for advice and orders.

The door opening there, showed to all the figure of the elder of the brothers three and as he came forward all eyes watched him, but now and then some of the pards looked at Irma to see how she was taking it.

"I said take but one!" exclaimed the King-pin, halting within ten yards of the guard. "I want my orders carried out to the letter. Take but one, Captain Dick."

"I told you so," said the high sheriff, turning to the girl who had listened to the orders with a white face. "You can't go into exile with the young man."

Irma fell from Oscar's side and then looked at the man standing alone a short distance away.

"I want to go along. You have banished one, why not two?"

The King-pin seemed to smile, but he did not reply.

"I loathe, hate this camp. I have seen within ten days enough to make me yearn for perpetual exile. I will go and never set foot within its borders. Here you may rule with your iron rod; here you may hold court with your high sheriffs and here you three may look at the terrible painting on the wall and rejoice over the death of the poor creature whose last drink was from the warm veins of her steed. I want to go, I say. I ask permission to accompany Oscar into banishment. You will let me go, Captain Lionel? You will not refuse this, the last request I shall ever make in Crossbar?"

The tall man heard every word. He seemed to wince as they fell from the lips of the imploring beauty.

But he did not stir. They seemed to have not the slightest effect upon him, unless it was to weld his lips and cause a slight shrugging of the broad shoulders.

"You will carry out your orders to the letter," he said, looking at Derringer Dick. "You know what they are and they will not be repeated here."

He turned his back on the group in front of Oscar's cabin. He walked away with the tread of a conqueror and left Irma with outstretched hands upon which fell the last rays of the sun.

"Come!"

Derringer Dick had wheeled upon Oscar and his hand was put forward once more.

"It shall be two, not one!" cried Irma as she threw herself to the front and halted there.

Lionel looked back. He saw all at a glance.

"You know what to do, Dick," he said.

A hand fell upon the girl's wrist. The eye of Derringer Dick was fastened upon her as his grip closed.

"The captain shall be obeyed at all hazards," he cried. "You cannot follow him into exile. You shall stay!"

Irma was pushed back; Oscar was caught by the hands of the other pards and the girl, before she could resist, though she still gripped the six-shooter, was thrust aside and even thrown not very gently into the cabin.

Lionel looked back once more. He saw the youth in the midst of the guard of exile and his lips seemed to part in a smile.

"That is one good play if it was an afterthought," he muttered. "It is clearing my way and cleaning out the camp. She won't get to follow him. Now for the tussle with the real enemy. I will have things in shipshape when we find Leon."

And across the Plaza he walked to re-enter the Triad House and throw his hat upon the table with a laugh.

CHAPTER XIX.

NERVES OF STEEL.

NIGHT seemed to follow the scene just witnessed with more haste than usual.

It came down upon Crossbar and after awhile the guard came back and Derringer Dick delivered a brief report to the man who awaited him in the House of the Triad.

"We took him out o' camp to the limits and told him to go," said the swarthy sheriff of Crossbar. "We told him to come back on pain of death."

"Well?"

"He gathered himself together and looked back over the hills as if he intended to defy us like the girl tried to do, but all at once he tramped off and left us standing there. He won't come back. That young fellow won't stop this side o' Frisco, or mebbe the sea. He has mettle, for once or twice before we reached the limits he was seen to look back and shut his hands, but he never spoke, but kept on in that dogged silence which characterized him from the start."

Lionel seemed satisfied and Dick withdrew.

In another minute Leo entered the room and the moment Lionel looked into the face of his younger brother he started up and caught his wrist.

"You have news!" he cried. "Is it news of Leon?"

Leo came forward and leaned against the table where he folded his arms upon his chest and studied the other.

"It is news of Leon. He is off on the child-hunt."

"I thought so. He is trailing the child of Salome, is he?"

"Yes."

"He may find the child grown."

"Yes."

"He may find it a person worthy of his steel."

"Boy or girl?"

Lionel shook head.

"There is where the mystery lies," he said.

"Silk Ribbon—or Captain Jason as he calls himself—has not told us that. But how did you discover that Leon, our brother, is off on the trail?"

"I tracked him from the mouth of the underground chambers. I came across his trail in the mountain outside. He took with him some money and rode the iron-gray horse which has been in the rock corral for months. If it was not a trial he would have ridden Montezuma off."

"That is true, but strange that he left nothing behind."

"He left something behind," quickly answered Leo, running his hand into his bosom and producing a paper. "This was found on the high rock at the corral. It is our brother's last message."

Lionel took the paper and bent to the light.

"I go to find the young vulture that survived; I am on the trail of the offspring of the woman whose life has cursed our race and whose death alone will not blot out the infamy. You will see that the cause of the Triad does not suffer in Crossbar during my absence. If necessary strike with an unsparing hand. Let the motto we adopted long ago be before you all the time. Spare not the enemies of the Triad. Make them feel the iron hand of the Three Captains and let no one touch the death scene which keeps before us the first vengeance of our hands. I will come back with vengeance fulfilled. I will return with the last of the vultures out of the way."

"LEON."

Such was the message which Lionel read while his silent brother looked on.

It was in Leon's handwriting and nothing was wanting to tell him that it was genuine.

When he had read he handed it back to Leo who tossed it upon the table with a smile.

"You have already struck," said the younger of the three.

"I have banished Oscar, the Jonah of Crossbar."

"You have sent him into perpetual exile, but you did not grant Irma her request?"

"Why should I have granted it?"

"She wanted to go, did she not?"

"Yes."

Leo was silent for a moment.

"I thank you, brother Lionel," he said.

"You played a good hand for me."

"How for you?"

"You sent off the young tiger and kept the dove."

A scowl which Leo did not see came like a thundercloud to Lionel's face.

He seemed to breathe hard. His countenance whitened and then turned a crimson hue.

"I will explain," answered Leo. "You have done me a service inasmuch as your action clears the field for me."

"I can't see how."

Leo laughed.

"I am in love, brother Lionel."

"In love? You?"

"I am in love with the beautiful Irma, the Seraph of Crossbar."

Lionel actually staggered from the face before him. He seemed to clutch at the table, but recovered in a moment and stood as erect as ever.

"I did not think of you while I was banishing the young eagle of the camp," he said. "I never thought of love while I was clearing the way before the Triad. You love her, do you? Leo, have you forgotten your oath?"

Lionel's hand caught the curtain that hid the painting on the wall, but the hand of Leo suddenly clutched the wrist and held it in a grip of iron.

"I forget nothing," he said, looking the stern Lionel in the eye. "I recall the oath we took together, three of us. But I can't help what I have said. I think of love in spite of that oath. Besides, it has been fulfilled."

"Not until we have Leon's report."

The hand of Leo resting on the table was seen to shake. He came forward and suddenly bared his breast to his brother.

"The oath, as you say, stands between us and everything else while one in whose veins runs her blood walks the face of the earth. We know not whether a child was born or not."

Captain Jason says one did come into the world, but he refused to tell more. This man is in Crossbar. Moreover, he carries on his person the gold cross which at one time was *her* property. We must force from him the secret to the last sentence. He shall divulge all he knows. What if he did come from Captain Dan? What if he did come up from the Southwest where we first came into power and from whence we came to Crossbar to rule with a rod of iron? Summon this man to the Court of the Triad. Summon him before us and let us tear from him—tear is the proper word—the secret which takes Leon off on a hunt for blood."

"It shall be done."

"That is right. Send for our high sheriff and—"

"No! It shall be done without Dick's knowledge. Captain Jason, or Silk Ribbon, will confront us within an hour."

Leo turned and walked out. He passed from the room without looking back, therefore he did not see the movement of the man whom he left behind.

He did not see Lionel spring to the door and lift his hands in a spasm of rage; he did not see the tall figure shake like a reed, nor hear the teeth that ground in madness as the great hands clinched and eyes flashed fire.

"He is my brother, but why was he ever born?" cried Lionel. "We could have won this fight without him, and now on the eve of success he comes between us like a shadow of blighting doom and I am stunned by his confession. But I will fight it through. Kin shall not stop me, nor shall the hand that would tear to pieces the written oath turn from the path I have made. He loves! He loves! Heavens! why didn't I dream of this to-night?"

The man stood like a statue in the room. He turned at last from the door and seemed to fight his way to the table.

"It shall be done!" he cried; "if a thousand brothers stood between me and mine I would not turn away."

Half an hour later Silk Ribbon Sam saw the door of his shanty open and the face of Lionel as calm as a summer's day appeared.

"Will you come down to the House?" asked the King-pin.

The detective arose and walked across the Plaza with the tall sport. They entered the house together and passed to the room of the hidden picture.

The door shutting behind them seemed to click, but the detective dropped into a chair which faced the one taken by Lionel and for a moment they looked at one another.

Leo came in and stood against the wall.

"We have sent for you to ask a question, Captain Jason," said Lionel. "If you will watch the curtain yonder you may see it move, half revealing the sand on the desert of death. You have said that the woman who lies along side her steed left a child. Where is that child?"

It was not the first time Silk Ribbon Sam had heard words similar to these. They had fallen from Leon's lips, but Leon was not there to utter them again and he knew not where he was.

For some time the cool head from Nowhere looked at the man before him and then, in as cool a voice as Lionel had used, he replied:

"There are trails which are not known to me. I cannot answer you."

"You cannot. Do you tell us, Captain Jason, that you cannot point out the trail of the child of Salome?"

"You might be able to strike that trail. You are trailers—all three of you."

Leo came forward and stopped at the table.

"Captain Jason, this is no child's play. We want the truth and your answer about the missing offspring. You are a man of knowledge; you know more than you show on the surface. We are the King-pins of Crossbar. We demand the truth and that now."

Silk Ribbon Sam thought rapidly.

He seemed to calculate the distance between him and the door. He saw, however, that the broad back of Leo was against the portal and that Lionel was also between him and the safety spot.

He had followed Lionel to the house with his mind made up, but he had been coolly confronted by two instead of one.

"Now or never," said Lionel, and his voice did not rise nor his calm face change. "This is a game to the death of one or many. This is Crossbar, not the plains of the Southwest. Captain Jason, we, like yourself, know more than we let on. We are the ministers of vengeance and not one of the accursed brood shall live."

"The accursed brood, eh?"

"The brood of the woman who is represented yonder," cried Lionel, covering the hidden painting for a moment. "Not one of her brood shall live and breathe the pure air of heaven. Why, her blood raised up a race of vipers in the desert."

"You must have hated her well," smiled Silk Ribbon. "You forget entirely whose milk moistened her lips when a babe."

Leo struck the table with his fist. He was leaning over it and his face was as red as the morning.

"We forget nothing!" he exclaimed. "We forget not even that. We have memories of that creature which we curse Heaven for not effacing."

"You men have lost every attribute of manhood—"

"No lecture!" broke in the cold but stern voice of Lionel. "You are in our power, Captain Jason. You are in a death-trap and this is Crossbar. By the eternal heavens! you shall not pass that door unless you tell us where lives the child of the woman yonder."

"Salome's child, you mean?"

"Yes, Salome's child. Tell us."

Silk Ribbon Sam rose and seemed to step back from the table. His back touched the wall.

There was a meeting of lips used to meet sternly when confronted by danger, or when a cool play was needed. He saw that the crisis of his stay in Crossbar had come. To show cowardice now was to invite the iron hand of the Three King-pins.

His own hand which had fallen to his side as he rose had stopped there, but the fingers suddenly closed round a dark object which came up with the rapidity of a leaping serpent.

"I will tell you, but not now!" he said. "I will say, however, that you have been nearer that child than you think."

Leo and Lionel looked at the cool head and saw that the six-shooters which he held were gripped by hands that quavered not and backed by nerves of steel.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ARMED TRUCE.

THE two brothers saw that the man before them was a man of steel nerves.

If he had been cornered there was fight in every drop of his blood, and if he had come to Crossbar to play a cool game, he was ready to meet every crisis.

Silk Ribbon Sam must have seen that he had been unmasked to a certain extent by the coolness and suspicions of the King-pins of the gold-camp. He must have discovered by this time that his mission was suspected, for he had seen men on his track, and about the door of his shanty at the dead of night had glided figures who had been seen to move toward the House of the Triad after watching him.

Leo and Lionel looked into the calm eyes of the detective and avenger, and seemed to study him for a little while.

"There need be no war between us," said Lionel, speaking first. "We want to know what became of Salome's child."

"You mean that, having discovered that, you will inaugurate a hunt which shall not stop short of a human heart. I understand you, and now that we are face to face and you have shown your hand, I might as well proceed to divulge something in the nature of a secret."

Was this man from the outside going to tell everything? Was he about to reveal the true secret of his coming to Crossbar and let them look into that which had been dark before?

"We are ready to listen," responded Leo. "If you are ready to tell what you know we will not interrupt you."

"You will interrupt me, as I well know. You won't let me get beyond half a dozen sentences before you ply me with questions, but I say beforehand that I will not answer those I don't want to deal with."

There was no reply to this and the two brothers, moving close to the table, looked at the man leaning against the wall.

"In the first place the woman killed the other night in the tenth cabin was Gold Grace. She was the close friend and avenger of Captain Dan's wife, Salome."

"Then, in the name of heaven—"

"Silence!" broke in Lionel with a sharp glance at Leo. "Let him go on, brother."

"I told you you would be interrupting me," smiled Silk Ribbon Sam. "But never mind. She was Gold Grace and the hand that killed her knew what it was doing. You hold Mountain Morg for that crime, but the man is innocent. He had no need to kill her. Mountain Morg never in all his rough life lifted his hand against a woman. Gold Grace was a character. She was oath-bound and her mission was to find the hands that removed from earth the woman who was Captain Dan's second wife."

Leo and Lionel exchanged glances again and for a moment both seemed on the eve of speaking, but not a lip moved.

"You may ask what brought Gold Grace to Crossbar," continued Silk Ribbon. "You may ask, too, why I am here. Gold Grace may have been on the trail, or thought she was. But she wasn't permitted to find out for certain, for the dagger found her in the night and Mountain Morg discovered the woman dead in the shanty. What she might have done is known to the man who put her out of the way. He must have known that she was a tracker—he must have known that she was avenging the dead, that she came to Crossbar in the course of her sworn man-hunt only to perish where she did. Beyond this death is something which stands unrevealed. Beyond the shanty where the assassin came suddenly upon Gold Grace is a mystery

which time will unravel and show up to the world.

"She knew and loved Salome, the woman who captured Captain Dan. She herself captured the Plumed Bandit of the Hills and dragged him at her chariot wheels awhile, but Salome held him longest. You ought to have heard of these two women—the one who caught and lost Captain Dan, the other who held him in thrall till he sent her off and to her death, though he knew it not."

"He did not know it, you say?"

"Captain Dan did not know that Salome died as you picture represents," smiled Silk Ribbon, looking up at the curtain that concealed the painting on the wall. "He did not know that Salome went over the waste with vultures over head and wolves at her heels."

The brothers seemed to smile and the hand of Lionel fell lightly on the table.

"That is true. She died—this creature did—died alone on the waste. And we will find her child if we have to ransack the whole earth. It was not Captain Dan's child. No, it was the child of the man who first won her heart and coaxed her into that hateful alliance. That woman became the branded enemy of her race when she became the wife of that man. She went off with him and for three years was hidden somewhere."

"And for three years you have no account of her?"

"That is right."

"During that time the child was born."

"How old would it be now if living?"

"You can calculate for yourselves."

"It would be twenty and past."

"A little past."

"What sex?"

"I leave that for you to discover," said Silk Ribbon. "You are banded against Salome's offspring. You know how the husband died. You know what became of the wife. You are tigers, men of Crossbar."

This accusation, sent hurtling into the teeth of these two men, seemed to send both to the wall.

The Western avenger stood and regarded them as they sent across the table looks which would have killed had they been arrows or bullets.

"You are not Captain Jason," suddenly cried Leo.

"Do you think I am not?"

"You may know all about Captain Dan and his old band, but you are not one of them. You are not Captain Jason, I say."

Silk Ribbon Sam came round the table, his eyes watching the twin brothers like hawks.

"If it makes you wiser to know the truth, know that I am not Captain Jason," he said.

"Know that I am here for a purpose and that that purpose will not be revealed till Leon returns. Know, men of the Triad Court of Crossbar, that I will not tell what I know till the lost member of the Three comes back. You say he is off on the trail of the marked child of Salome. Do you know that if Gold Grace had not been killed in the shanty, the revolver of woman's vengeance would have injected into the life of Crossbar a scene which was not on the bills? This woman came hither with the coolness of Satan. She came with an oath behind her and with revenge surging up in her soul."

"But she never got to strike," said Lionel.

"No. She was found out too soon for her purpose. She was discovered a mite too soon for the work she had in hand. But let us go back. What are you going to do with Mountain Morg? You know he did not take Gold Grace's life."

"Let him prove that he did not?"

"With your court as it is organized he could prove nothing," returned Silk Ribbon Sam. "With everything in his favor, the verdict would be against him. You have it in for Mountain Morg and Crossbar wants a victim. But he shall not go to the Triad Court without a helper. There will be a friend near him when the trial opens. I will defend him."

"You, eh?"

"I will defend Mountain Morg against this charge and, what is more, I will prove him innocent. I am here for a purpose, which, as I have said, shall not be revealed until Leon returns."

"Then you want an armed truce?"

"That would suit me, but, first, Mountain Morg shall be set at liberty."

"We accept. It shall be an armed truce, liable to be broken at any moment after Leon's return."

"That will do."

Silk Ribbon Sam walked to the door and, touching the latch, looked into the eyes at his shoulder and encountered the cold gleams that filled them.

"You are a man-hunter—a tracker of men," said Leo at the door.

"I am an avenger. I am oath-bound and by the books of eternity! I shall carry out that vow or perish on the trail."

"You may perish on the trail. You forget that the hands which struck years ago are powerful now. The truce lasts only until Leon's return. After that, war—war to the knife."

Silk Ribbon opened the door and walked into

the hall. He stopped there and looked back at the brothers standing in the audience room of the Triad House.

"You are free to walk the streets of Crossbar," said the voice of Lionel. "Your friend and spy, Mountain Morg, shall step from his prison within the present hour. This truce has been granted at your request, not brought about by threats. It is an armed one. It can be broken at any time and the first movement on the part of our enemies breaks it. Remember, this is Crossbar and the people who inhabit it are the pards of the Three Captains, Leo, Leon and Lionel!"

Silk Ribbon reached the street with the shadows of night entangling themselves on the path.

He had emerged from the den of tigers and for a moment seemed to breathe hard as he walked away.

Ten minutes later he was surprised by a figure that came to his shanty and once more he looked into the face of Mountain Morg.

"It's an armed truce, they say!" said the burly fellow as he leaned against the logs with his arms folded. "They came to me and opened the door saying that it was a truce till Leon came back."

"That is true, Morg," and Silk Ribbon took the dark, soft hand of the speaker.

"Where is Leon?"

"He is looking for Salome's child."

Mountain Morg broke into a laugh.

"Then, the truce is to be a long one!" he exclaimed.

"Not so long as you think," was the reply. "It may terminate at any time. They have banished Oscar."

"When?"

"This day witnessed the exile. Now, you know why the truce may not be a long one."

Mountain Morg came closer and his face almost touched Silk Ribbon as he bent down.

"Oscar is Salome's child!"

"Great heavens!" cried Mountain Morg, falling back and then became calm. "I have dreamed of that more than once when I had looked into the young man's eyes. I thought he had the kind of eyes you have told me about. I wonder they did not notice it."

"They never heard of Salome's child till I came."

Mountain Morg drew off and took in a long breath.

"If Leon discovers the truth—if he does this and finds Oscar in the mountains—the truce will be a short one."

"Morg, you must go out."

"Out yonder?" and the hand of Mountain Morg pointed to the dark peaks of the hills.

"Yes. You must go out and find and protect Oscar. Make the truce one of a few days' duration if you can. Give me time to stack the cards against the Three Captains of Crossbar."

"But it will be leaving you in the lion's den."

"I have been there before," answered Silk Ribbon. "This is the one loved trail of my life, Morg. Go out yonder and see that Oscar does not fall into the hands of Leon, the child-hunter. I will take care of myself here. The brothers know who I am—"

"Did you proclaim your identity?"

"They know that I am not Captain Jason. They know that I am an avenger, and more than suspect that I am oath-bound and that my life work is to find the men who sent the secret wife of Captain Dan to the desert."

"Well, haven't you found them, Silk Ribbon Sam?"

The voice was a whisper and the man who spoke had placed one of his hands on the detective's shoulder and was looking down into his face with a grin.

"I have reached the spot where the trail is to end. I am at the last act of the drama. I have seen the picture on the wall and felt my blood burn in every vein. But you must go."

"I will go. I am off now—off to find and protect Salome's child from the vengeance of his uncles," and with this, the door opened and Silk Ribbon Sam saw Mountain Morg cross the threshold of the hut.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLAY IN THE DARK.

IN Crossbar the acts of the Three King-pins went unquestioned.

The sudden release of Mountain Morg was not opposed, though men in groups discussed it, saying that perhaps the captains knew what they were about and hoped that it was for the good of the camp.

One man who saw the Piute Pansy walk out was struck with astonishment more than any others and he even followed him some distance as though he would stop him and ask him why this sudden change in his fortunes.

Sol Solstice, or Julius of the Blasted Hand, was this person, who let slip an oath when he came back from following Mountain Morg who bent his course from camp.

"Let out?—set free?" he cried. "I can't see

into this. There was to have been a trial which meant the speedy death of the spy at the hands of the pards of the Three King-pins, but instead of that, he walks away unhurt. Something has happened. Something has turned up in his favor. Silk Ribbon Sam, the detective who is playing it cool in Crossbar, has a hand in this release, but how did he hoodwink the brothers three?"

Mystified and more perplexed, Julius came back and sought his shanty.

The puzzle deepened. He thought and thought, yet got no nearer the end, and at last with an exclamation he threw wide the door and strode forth.

"There is one way to get at this mystery and that is to face the man who can solve it," he said. "He knows me and why I am here. We have met before and I have told him that I intend to baffle his game if I can, for I have a right to strike the banded brothers of Crossbar. I will see him. I will face Silk Ribbon Sam again and remind him that his game must not interfere with mine."

Sol Solstice threw open the door of the detective's shanty without the formality of a knock.

He stood face to face with the very man he sought, and Silk Ribbon Sam, looking up at him as he halted in the light of the lamp that burned on the pine table, stood like a giant there with his eyes in a gleam.

"You are playing a strange hand," were his first words.

"Ah! you have found that out, have you?" asked Silk Ribbon.

"You have forced the King-pins to turn Mountain Morg out."

"I have brought about an armed truce."

"An armed truce, eh? I thought you had done something of the kind. For how long is the truce?"

"It lasts until Leon returns."

"And Leon—"

"Leon is off on a mission," interrupted the detective of the Southwest.

"They said at the opening of the trial that he was missing."

"So he was."

"And you say he is off on a mission?"

"He is."

The Blasted Hand came closer and stooped within a foot of the detective's shoulder.

"I have warned you, Silk Ribbon. I have told you that you must not interfere with my game."

"With your game? I know you not in this hunt."

In an instant the face of Sol Solstice turned white.

"You know me not, eh?" he cried and his voice sounded strangely.

"I know you not," repeated Silk Ribbon Sam.

"Then this is your hunt and nobody else's?"

"It is my hunt!"

The lips met firmly behind the last words and the eyes of the two men encountered.

"Do you know that your life is in my hands—that I could brush you from the trail by a word?" almost hissed Sol as he leaned forward and seemed to shut his hands in the detective's face.

"I know what a mad fool can do, but I don't fear him. This is a truce. It will be kept till Leon comes back."

"It can be broken. You forget that men are treacherous, that they have tiger blood in their veins, and that I can destroy your hopes by lifting a hand."

"Go out yonder and destroy them," coolly said Silk Ribbon Sam. "Go out on the Plaza and proclaim in a loud voice the gospel of destruction."

Sol drew back with a look of amazement; this man was cooler than he thought and he could not conceive how one under the circumstances could play such a hand without a tremor.

"You won't go, eh?" and Sam rose and reached out his hand. "I will accompany you. I will stand beside you and listen while you tell them all about me and who I am. I will even furnish you with what missing links you may need. Come, we will go together."

There was no mistaking the meaning of these words. Their speaker meant everything he said and Sol Solstice knew it. No wonder he drew off, refusing the outstretched hand and looked at the man who was showing more coolness than he thought a man capable of exhibiting.

"You won't go, eh? Then I will perform a similar service for you. I will go down to the Plaza and tell the story of your life work."

"You will?"

"Why not? Since Crossbar or its Captains know who I am and what I am here for, why shouldn't it have revealed your hunt in all its lights and shades?"

"I didn't mean to carry my threat that far with you."

"No? You only intended to let them know that I am closing in on them. You simply intended to inform the pards of Crossbar that I am a vengeance-hunter, that from the

parched lips of a certain woman I heard a story which rendered me oath-bound, and that from that day I have been on the trail, picking up a link here, a link there, until I have the last ones in my hands. You didn't intend to do very much? No, you only wanted to throw me into the jaws of the lions, to break the armed truce and reconvene the Triad Court, not for the trial of Mountain Morg, but for my own destruction. I understand your game, Sol Solstice. I know why you are here. I know why you have come back to Crossbar after a few hours' absence. I am aware of the reason that prompted your return with scars where you had none before and with your hair cut and the color of your eyes changed by some devil magic of which you alone may possess the secret. You stand there and threaten to proclaim my hunt on the Plaza of Crossbar. Why not go out yonder together and swap stories for the amusement of the pards of this demon camp?"

There was no reply as Sol looked down into the cold, impassive face of the man who was his match in cunning.

He had heard enough, for he threw a hasty glance toward the door and would have retreated if the hand of Silk Ribbon Sam had not detained him.

"Your revenge has nothing lofty about it," said the detective. "It was nurtured in the dark and conceived in shame. You became a man-hunter because you were suited for nothing else and you have been a failure at that. You say you have a right to close in on the Three King-pins of Crossbar, and that you will not be baffled, not even by the hand which should avenge the crime of other years. Stand against that wall, and, looking me in the eye, tell me, if you dare, that, since coming to Crossbar, you have not committed murder."

"I?"

"I mean you, Sol Solstice, mis-called Julius, of the Blasted Hand," was the quick retort. "Stand yonder, I say, and tell me this if you can. I won't move after the story. I will listen to the confession and keep it. I won't carry it to the Plaza, nor to the house of the Triad. I will carry it in my breast, but you shall not play here a game against me like a murderer in the dark. You are now a banished man. You talk about revenge when, in a certain camp, there is a price on your head. You baffle me? Sol Solstice, open your head against me in this camp—break the armed truce before it expires—and you will wish you had never seen the eagle soar or the sun rise!"

The man biting his lips near the door, was seen to put his hand upon his hip, but the finger of Silk Ribbon Sam instantly covered it.

"Do you want a duel?" he asked. "I will accommodate you."

Sol Solstice straightened up and came forward once more.

"It shall be here and now," continued the detective. "You fought a duel once and basely killed before the signal your antagonist. I will see that you take no such advantage now."

"You won't fight me?" cried Sol in a sudden spasm of fury. "You don't want to leave this trail of yours before the armed truce ends."

"I will take the risks. Come out and stand in the open with the table between us. We will fire over the boards and at the signal one of us at least will quit this game among the everlasting hills."

"I won't fight that way."

"Not across the table? In the open then," and Silk Ribbon Sam stepped forth and presented himself in the full light with his head bared and his hand at the butt of his six-shooter.

"Name your weapons," he went on with a smile, as if he saw that the Blasted Hand was weakening.

"I don't fight to-night. I will not be drawn into a trap for my own destruction. I will not be hoodwinked just because I am out of humor. You can't play this game through and walk out of this shanty with Sol Solstice out of your way."

"Coward!" hissed Silk Ribbon.

"Some other time."

"If I wait on your pleasure, that time will never come!"

The answer to this was silence and Sol was at the door.

"You must not strike under-handed like a serpent," he continued. "We must understand one another in this camp. It is my last fighting ground, for here I finish the trail of my life one way or the other. You must not undermine me to these men. I will not submit to that, Sol Solstice. They don't recognize you, as yet. They don't know that the man who passes off in their midst as the Blasted Hand is the same person who escaped not many days since from the clutches of the Triad Court. I say these tiger pards don't know that, but they may have it revealed. Some time in the near future they may discover that you are here on a mission of low vengeance which the true man would spurn as unworthy of his nature. You are the vengeance-taker who spares no one. You are the wretch who sneaks from camp to camp living off the offal of the diggings. Sol Solstice, in quitting this shanty, know that I know you as few men do, and that the moment you strike at me in

Crossbar, and attempt to come between me and the fulfillment of my oath, I will strike you as you have never been struck before!"

Eye met eye for a minute, and then the door opened and shut in Silk Ribbon's face.

The detective saw a figure pass his window and sat down.

All at once he heard a footstep and was on his feet.

A form flitted past the shanty, and in a second he was at the door.

As he opened it and looked out something glided on, and with a smile he stepped out and stood in front of the cabin.

The next instant the report of a revolver broke the stillness of that part of the camp, and a bullet passed within half an inch of his head.

"I thought so," smiled Silk Ribbon as he went forward to see a figure vanish among the cabins. "I thought the serpent was mean enough for that sort of work. I know him thoroughly. Now, shall he baffle me? Shall this man come between me and my life-work? Never! I came hither to play the coolest hand of a man's life. I am waiting on the armed truce, and while I wait I will take care of number one."

He had stopped some distance from his shanty and the following moment was walking back.

At the same time a man was entering the shanty occupied by Sol Solstice, and when the door was shut behind this person he went forward and struck the table in the dark with a clinched hand.

"Why not?" he said aloud. "Why not break up this armed truce and show my hand? If this man succeeds, I fail. If he loses, I win."

He lighted a lamp and drew a stool to the table. Taking some papers from his pocket he began to cover a sheet with writing.

For twenty minutes he wrote as fast as he could and when he was through he read what he had written and folded it.

Clutching the message in his hand, he slipped from the shanty and hugged the shadows, and five minutes later one of his hands slid that same paper underneath the front door of the House of the Triad.

No one seemed to see this act, and when Sol went back with a devilish grin on his face, he stood erect in his cabin and ejaculated triumphantly:

"Now!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE UNEXPECTED.

"I WILL show him that I can strike as well as he, and that with the same power. Let him wait. He will learn that Sol Solstice is not the man to lick the heel that crushes him. He will discover that this is not a truce till Leon comes back. I am still on deck."

These words followed the defiant "now!" which fell from the Blasted Hand's lips when he had slid the letter underneath the door of the Triad Court.

No one heard him; he was sole occupant of the shanty, and as he looked out at the night, which seemed to have deepened about the cabins of Crossbar, he smiled as though he was sure that his game was to succeed.

Sol Solstice stood ready to carry out the play he had formed in his heart.

Silk Ribbon Sam knew him and his designs; he knew also his past, and had sworn that he should not baffle the real avenger of the woman who died on the desert.

The sounds that nightly came from the Green Paradise reached Sol's ears while he remained in his shanty.

Was he waiting to see the result of the delivery of the note underneath the door?

At last he stole forth and crossed the Plaza. He saw the lights in the den where the rough-shirted men of Crossbar sat at the tables, or stood along the bar, showing their giant figures in the gleams of the tin lamps that dotted the place.

Halting on the Square he looked in that direction a few moments and then moved on.

He was suddenly startled by a footstep and the next moment he looked into the face of a man who had stolen upon him with the noiselessness of a cat.

Sol Solstice recoiled from this person for a second and then went up and grinned in his face.

They were not at all alike. The new-comer was smaller than Sol and showed signs of travel. His hat was dirty and crushed over his brow; his garments were the worse for the wear, and in one hand he carried a Winchester. It did not take Sol long to recover for he seemed to see that sudden recovery was necessary, and grasping the man's arm, he drew him to one side and looked toward the den.

"I know they're there—the tigers are," said the stranger with a grin. "What are you playing here? Who are you? You don't look like Sol, but you're Sol all the same, for, no matter how you disguise yourself, you couldn't hoodwink me."

"I haven't tried to hoodwink you," was the reply. "I didn't look for you here, but since you've come—"

"Don't you know that I'm liable to turn up at any time and everywhere?"
 "I might have known that."
 "I've had a time. I had a tussle out yonder on the trail. I fought a duel!"
 "Fought a duel?"
 "Yes."
 "With whom?"
 "With a man who was as cool as a cucumber and as haughty as a duke."

"You don't mean—"
 "I don't know what his name was. We came together and suddenly discovered that this earth, big as it is, was too small for both of us. Queer, wasn't it?"
 "I should say so. Well, how did the duel terminate?"

The stranger held up the Winchester and glanced admiringly at it.
 "You got the best of him, eh?" asked Sol.
 "I guess I wouldn't be here if I didn't. It was rifle ag'in revolver, and I got the drop on him. I had to be quick though and he was like a cat in his movements. You wouldn't have thought it from his looks. I had to shoot quicker than you can say 'Jack Robinson,' and when he threw up his hands and went over the gulch wall I knew he would never fight again."

All this time Sol was looking at the man with his eyes bulging out and eagerness seaming his face.

"You must have met Mountain Morg," he said at last.

"I wouldn't judge him by such a name."

"Why not?"

"I would rather call him Starchy Jack or Band-box William. He was neat and natty, but he had a tiger eye—I saw that when he threw up the six-shooter."

"Heavens, man! you didn't shoot Leon?"

"That sounds more like it from the looks of him," was the answer. "Leon, eh? You know him, then?"

"Leon is the second King-pin of Crossbar."

"Jehosaphat!" cried the other. "And if I did shoot Leon, my life ain't worth much here."

"It isn't worth a copper."

With a sudden start the duelist looked around while Sol smiled at his trepidation.

"What are you doing here? What are you playing in this camp?" continued the stranger.

"I am playing a game of my own. I am at work."

"You don't want help? You don't need one of the old pards, eh, Sol? I might be of service to you."

"Not after that fight on the mountain."

"So it was Leon! I'll go back and look."

"I would advise you to stay away."

"Because of that fight?"

"Yes."

The other seemed to shrug his shoulders.

"I didn't know who he was, but he kivered me and I had to fight. I wasn't permitted to argue the point for I came upon him suddenly and he was trying to kiver me when I let drive and ended the matter. Leon? One of the King-pins of Crossbar? I've heard of them. And you are here with a game? Say, Sol, isn't it just a bit dangerous for you?"

"To be sure it is, but that's my look-out."

The new-comer looked into the eyes of his companion and seemed to note something interesting there.

"Sol," said he, "you aren't trying to wipe out this camp, ar' you?"

"Not quite, Tony."

"You're always up to something of the kind. You remember how they got the best of you in the Bumblebee Hills—"

"There! That will do," broke in Sol with his hand at the man's arm. "This is not the place for such reminiscences. Besides, I'm in no humor to hear them. I don't want you to get into trouble, but if they should discover that you killed Leon, no matter how honorably to yourself, your life wouldn't be worth a breath in this camp."

With a sudden demon in his eye, the other drew off and looked at Sol.

"By Jove! if they knew certain things about you how would you fare I would like to know?" he exclaimed.

"Come! You don't want to get both of us into trouble. You can't afford to play with death, Tony."

"And you can't afford to stand on your dignity," was the swift retort. "I don't care to stay in Crossbar a minute if I have poked my nose into a trap. If I have killed Leon, one of the famous King-pins of this devil's retreat, I'll go on."

Sol Solstice breathed freer.

All at once, however, he was relieved of this pleasant feeling, for Tony suddenly straightened up and said:

"I guess I'll go in and see the inside of a Crossbar paradise ere I move on."

The lights of the Green Paradise seemed to allure him as he saw them from the Plaza, and he took a step forward when Sol seized his arm.

"It's fatal for you to go in there," he said.

"They will know you."

"Who will?"

"Hungry Hank—"

"Is he yonder?"

"He is there!"

"The man I've been looking for for months."

Sol saw his blunder.

"I want to see Hungry Hank," continued Tony. "You don't know that after you left the old camp he cheated me and had to run off? I swore that some day I'd find him and pay him back."

"But he numbers the pards of Crossbar among his friends now."

"If he had Tartarus at his back I'd go in there and knock him down!"

The speaker pulled away from Sol's grasp and was on his way to the den.

"It will prove fatal to me if he gets there and makes a scene. He will have no more sense than to unmask me and I will be Sol Solstice to these tigers of the mountain. He must not go!"

In an instant the hand of Sol Solstice was at the man's shoulder, and as it closed there a revolver went up and Tony to his dismay and chagrin was looking down the muzzle of the cold-steel barrel.

It seemed to bring him to his senses in a jiffy.

"What are you going to do, Sol?"

"I intend to save you from the pards of Leon if I have to blow your brains out to accomplish my purpose!"

Tony grew white for the revolver was touching his forehead and one had never been that close before.

"Take your choice," continued Sol. "I will do what I threaten. You must not enter that place and be recognized. You shot Leon, the second King-pin, in the mountain, and you will be torn to pieces there."

The argument seemed to have the desired effect and in another moment Sol was walking off with the man who had arrived at such an inopportune time.

They went together to the confines of the camp and there Sol halted.

"Go back to the scene of the duel. If you find your victim's body, hide it from every eye. Don't let wolf or vulture find it, to say nothing of the men who were his pards. Yonder stands the House of the Triad and in this camp sits the coolest court in the world. Go at once and for the safety of both of us, find and bury the corpse of Leon, the Tiger."

"Is it that bad, Sol?"

"I haven't told the worst," was the answer.

"I will remain here till my work is done."

"What is your work this time?"

"Vengeance."

"What for?"

"I have tracked down the men who long ago whipped me in the gulch."

"Oh, the old grudge, eh?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel on your back the switches they used? Sol, you ain't risking your neck just to get even for a switching?"

"I am risking my neck for that. I have found the men who did it, I say. Another avenger is in this very camp, but he strikes for a woman. He is at the end of his trail and if he wins, I fail."

"Let him win if it will save your head."

"Never! Come, Tony, you are going down to where you left Leon of the Triad. You put an end to his trail and unless the truce is broken soon, it may last forever."

"The truce, Sol?"

"Yes, but you can't understand. You can't know what it was about, nor who made it. I am working to break it and he will discover that he can't beat me out of the lives I want."

With a look which Sol never forgot, Tony drew off again and held out his hand.

Three minutes later they separated and Sol Solstice saw the man who had given him such a fright move off and go down the trail which led toward the gulches.

"He might come back!" suddenly said Sol. "There is too much risk in letting him go. I can't afford to take it."

He whipped out his revolver and ran after Tony.

Half a minute later the silence was broken by a sharp report and a puff of white smoke rose above some stunted bushes that grew near the trail.

Then all was still again.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CUPID HAS AN INNING.

THE armed truce came to be known to the pards of Crossbar long before another day lighted up the hills and valleys of the region.

They knew why Mountain Morg had been set free and why Silk Ribbon Sam, to them Captain Jason, was permitted to have the freedom of the camp when it was more than suspected that he was an evil genius among its shanties.

To these rough men it was a battle of suspicion between the King-pins and Captain Jason.

As to Julius, alias Sol Solstice, they did not connect him with the person suspected of kill-

ing Dagon, the high sheriff, who had been buried minus his head on the mountain. They never dreamed that he was that individual, thanks to the devil magic by which he had disguised himself, and whenever he came out and stalked through the camp with the blasted hand at his side, he was an object of pity.

But Silk Ribbon knew. Sam had seen through the disguise worn by Sol and knew what the sneaking avenger of his own whipped back was after.

It was the day after the night which witnessed the meeting between Sol Solstice and Tony, and the morning, fresh and beautiful, had dawned on the mountain camp.

Across the Plaza, dressed in a suit that rendered him more handsome than ever, walked a man who was seen by a score of men who wondered what clothed him so well at that early hour.

Leo, the younger of the Three Captains, passed on and reached the door of Irma's home.

The girl who had caught sight of him from her window stood breathless and pale in the middle of the little room and was waiting for him with strange interest.

The fingers of Leo struck the door and Irma opened it.

As the King-pin crossed the step he doffed his hat and in another moment was leaning against the logs while he looked at Irma who was trying to hide the face she did not want him to see in its full meaning of color.

Leo toyed with the fringe of his Mexicanish sash and suddenly in a voice that did not seem his own, opened the conversation:

"Irma, this day is to determine the fate of one of the citizens of Crossbar."

The girl started, showing him her face and for a second felt the hot blood mount to her temples in dashing currents.

"Who is to be tried now?" she asked. "I thought they had let Mountain Morg out and that there was a truce till Leon returns."

"That is true. There is to be no session of the Triad Court till the truce is at an end unless—"

She was watching him closely and he stopped with a suddenness that surprised her.

"But court or no court," continued Leo, "this day decides the fate of a citizen of Crossbar. I am that citizen."

"You, Captain Leo?"

"I. I am the person whose fate must be settled ere the sun goes down. Irma, long I have looked upon you with eyes that saw in you my fate. I have seen you grow to womanhood among the cabins of Crossbar, bringing into this demon camp, as they call it, more real beauty and joy than it has ever known. I could not help regarding you with eyes of love and—Girl, why proceed in this strain? You must have noticed—you must have seen at different times—that my heart was in your keeping, and that Leo was in the meshes woven by your beauty and your manners."

What could have been plainer than this? Irma seemed to shrink from the man who had spoken. She recoiled though there was no sign of danger and stood off with her shoulders touching the wall while she regarded him with trembling lips and downcast eyes.

A handsomer man than Leo, the King-pin, never walked the narrow streets of Crossbar; but Irma knew to some extent the history of the cool Three.

At the same time there rose before her a young man threading the unknown passes of the mountain, and she saw Oscar, the exiled, going deeper and deeper into the shadows of the hills, driven out by the mandate of the very man who stood before her.

There could be but the one reply to Leo's wooing.

The younger King-pin might have known it before he set foot beyond Irma's door.

Suddenly with an effort the girl looked up and met his searching gaze.

She did not falter now. As though strengthened by some inward monitor, she came toward him and in a voice which might have softened the blow she replied:

"I never thought I was raising such hopes in your bosom. I never dreamed that you would enter my cabin with a story of love. Let it pass as having been told. Let us be friends forever; but I cannot—no, I cannot return that love which you offer, nor pledge you the favor your love would seek."

He did not color, but his lips met.

He watched Irma while she spoke and when she had finished he threw out his hand and laughed:

"That is plain, to say the least; but one question, girl."

She waited for the query with her eyes riveted upon him.

"Do you love Lionel?"

"Do I love your brother?" she cried. "What prompts that query, Captain Leo?"

The man turned white. He seemed to grow in stature as he raised one hand above his head and brought it down against the door.

"Never mind! You don't love me; you confess that you don't love Lionel. See that you keep that confession unbroken."

That was all. With an abruptness that startled Irma the handsome King-pin turned to the portal and threw it open.

"I thought I would get ahead of him," he laughed, looking back over his shoulder at her. "I have done so. If you don't love me, by heavens! girl, you don't want to love my brother. You don't want to feel the hand of the younger King-pin."

Out he went, the sun catching the gilt fringe of his sash, and seeming to transform it into strings of fire.

Irma still unnerved by his last words saw him cross the Plaza and mount the steps of the House of the Triad.

She saw him open the door and vanish beyond it, but she could see no further.

If she could have gone beyond that portal, she would have seen Leo stride to the room of the painting and coolly seat himself at the table while he watched the door he had just shut.

It opened while he watched, revealing the tall, handsome figure of Lionel, and that worthy came forward with a gleam in his eye.

"What news?" he asked, seeing Leo twirling his hat on the table.

"Not much to your liking," was the reply.

"How's that?"

"Oh, I've been making love a little this morning—that's all."

Lionel seemed to start and reaching for the nearest chair, he did not take it, but clutched the top round with his silken hands and looked down in amazement at Leo.

"You've been making love, eh?" he stammered.

"What does this interest me?"

"A good deal," laughed Leo. "I expect it all depends on who the woman is."

Lionel seemed to flush.

"I thought I would steal a march on you, brother Lionel," continued Leo. "In some businesses it is 'first come first served,' you know. Sometimes it is true of lovemaking. I thought it might be true in this case. But," with a grin, "it wasn't."

"You didn't succeed, then?"

"No, I lost the play."

"Try again, my brother."

It was Lionel who was the taunter now.

"Hold!" and the hand of Leo ceased from twirling the hat and his eyes were fastened on his brother.

"If I failed I have the satisfaction of knowing that you won't fare any better at the same shrine."

"What do you mean?"

"I made love to the beautiful Irma and failed. She told me in the same breath and with seeming pleasure, that you will fare no better when you throw Cupid's dice."

Lionel stood like a statue before the man seated coolly at the table and taking the greatest delight in what he was saying.

"Did you take that unwarrantable liberty with my name?" he said at last.

"Why not? I wanted to know, since I did not succeed myself, if I was to have the fair Irma for a sister-in-law."

The hands before Leo shut hard and the teeth beneath the blond mustache seemed to meet in anger.

"You are no brother of mine!" hoarsely cried Lionel.

"You can't unmake the kinship that our parents gave us," was the quick and cool response.

"I will unmake it whether they consent or not! I will show you, Leo, some things are too sacred for you to trifle with."

"Very well," smiled Leo, who seemed determined to lose none of his cleverness and to keep his temper under all circumstances. "The die has been cast. I threw it for both of us this morning. Irma will become the wife of some one outside the Triad. She has said as much and she is one of the women who don't change their minds."

Lionel turned toward the curtain and his hand touched it as he looked once more at Leo.

"You need not lift the curtain which hides the past in our lives for I know what is there. Awhile ago you reminded me of my oath and here you have broken it yourself."

"I?"

"You."

"How?"

"You love Irma, the Seraph of Crossbar."

Lionel stood for a moment looking down in the face above the chair and all at once, coming forward, he leaned over the table his hands resting on the edge and his eyes setting on fire his cold and clear-cut face.

"It is true! I love the Seraph of Crossbar, and, what is more, I will win her in spite of her answer to you and your own interference! Here! there need be no alliance between us longer."

"You can't force me out of the Triad, neither can you leave it yourself. The oath! the oath!"

Leo was on his feet and his figure was in front of Lionel with the table between them.

"We can do this—'tis the only thing left for us to do! This will dissolve the vow. When Leon comes back there need be but the one to greet him."

There fell upon the table as Lionel spoke a Bowie-knife at which Leo looked a moment and then into the eyes above it.

"I have another, or, if you prefer, take your own!" cried Lionel. "We must fight it out, brothers though we are. In the presence of the picture whose subject linked us together as brothers were never banded before, we will fight to the death. The winner will win the beautiful creature whose face has broken the desert-taken oath. Wait! I will throw up the curtain that she may look down at us. There! You see her as she knelt to drink the hot blood from her black steed's veins. You see her as her life went out—the creature who disgraced our race and made us a trio of fiends. Now!"

Leo's hand had caught up the Bowie and he was standing at the end of the table.

He looked at the picture and then turned his gaze upon Lionel who had clutched the hilt of another knife similar in make-up, and thus armed they faced each other amid the silence of that chamber where the morning light fell and danced over the wall.

Leo faced the painting; Lionel's back was toward it.

All at once the hand of Lionel went up and the shining blade was poised above his head.

"If Leon never comes back, the winner of the fight will be the richest bonanza King-pin in the Wild West!" he said. "Are you ready?"

"Love makes fools of men. I will not be one of them. Win her if you can!" and the next second the Bowie was flung from Leo's hand and he saw it break where it struck the wall, the blade bounding back and falling on the table before the white-faced and startled Lionel.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

THE two brothers for a moment after Leo's action stood face to face with the rough boards of the table between them. The broken Bowie lay before them and the eyes of Leo, flashing still, regarded the other with a look they had not held for some time.

"I will not be love's fool. You may, if you like the character. I am, as I have been, one of the Triad brothers. I am for Crossbar against its foes," and turning abruptly, he crossed the chamber and passed out.

Cool and pale stood Lionel, looking at the blade. He had not recovered from his brother's singular and startling act, nor had he fully realized what nerve it had cost Leo.

Suddenly, however, he bounded across the room, flung wide the door and looked for the missing man; but Leo was not to be seen.

After a while he came back, swept the dagger from the table, sat down and began to write. The silence was not broken and he finished his communication without interruption.

When he was through he folded what he had written and sealed it, melting some wax over the lamp and stamping it with a ring while it was hot.

Leo had left the House of the Triad.

The younger member of the Three had passed across the Plaza, looking into the Green Paradise as he went along and halting at last near a shanty which he eyed for awhile with more than passing curiosity.

"The truce is on yet," he muttered while he looked. "I hold in my possession the communication which was thrust underneath the door and which accuses Captain Jason of divers things. We know him for our foe, but the truce can't be broken, else I would call him out now."

Inside the cabin so closely watched by Leo sat the man against whom his words were directed. Silk Ribbon Sam after his heated interview with Sol Solstice had kept to himself, though he felt that the scoundrel would perpetrate some rascality calculated to harm him in the eyes of Crossbar.

He knew the man—knew that he was there for the purpose of carrying out his own revenge which was to pay certain parties back for a deserved whipping on the desert, and that if he did not get to carry out his revenge, he would not let any one else succeed in the same direction.

Leo advanced toward the shanty ere he went on.

He seemed eager to look beyond it as if he coveted an interview with its inmate, but all at once he turned and went in another direction.

"The truce stands between us," he said. "When Leon comes back there will be a settlement. This man who has come to Crossbar for vengeance will have to face the music and he will come off second best if the hand of the Triad has lost none of its power. As for the girl—I'm glad that point is settled between us, and that Lionel won't hear anything to his advantage when he throws the dice of love. He wanted to fight me. He was eager to shed my blood and all on account of a pretty face which has attracted some one else besides us—probably the young exile, for didn't she want to go into exile with him and wasn't it all Derringer Dick could do to keep her back?"

Leo laughed as he passed down the darkened street and vanished like a ghost where the mines were.

He entered one of these and groped his way down to the main rooms which were chambers of various dimensions and when he found himself in a certain one, as he could tell by feeling the walls, he struck a match and held it above his head.

The light falling on the tall figure of the Triad brother fell also on mining tools and revealed the chamber where he had halted. He moved the little torch and looked around.

"We get the gold here," he said in audible tones. "We rob the earth of its wealth to make us some day the richest nabobs in the Wild West. But I would give all we have, I would even rob Leon and Lionel, to be able to purchase that peace which was ours before we became what we are. It was years ago and despite what I am, there comes before me a face which I remember in its girlish beauty and which appears to me among the flowers of a little garden where all was peace, and love."

His words had a strange echo in that place. The match flickered and went out and the King-pin, standing in the dense darkness that followed, continued:

"Why not go elsewhere and let others fight it out and end the drama which one day must end in blood? There is no escape from the just retribution which must overtake the Triad. We may elude it for a time, but the end will be the same. This cool head who has come is but one of the avengers of that infamous deed. He is but the forerunner of vengeance. There may be a legion of Silk Ribbon Sams; there may be a dozen men banded together to carry out the oath of revenge which seems to eclipse the one we took in that moment of hatred and revenge. Who knows where the others are? They may be near, or nearing the camp. I know what Leon and Lionel would say. They would counsel fight to the bitter end and that is what surges up in my heart when I think of the coolness of this man-hunter who, as said by the letter I found under the door, will turn aside from nothing until he has avenged the death of the victim of the desert."

Leo had passed into another chamber smaller than the one he had first visited and there he leaned against the wall and for some time looked at his surroundings as they were revealed by the second light he secured.

"So the woman who died in the tenth cabin was Gold Grace, Salome's friend. Was she on the trail of vengeance? Did she know we were here—the Triad Court of Crossbar? It is to be a fight to the death and the end can't be long delayed."

He went back. Once more he passed out of the mine and felt the breath of night on his cheek.

"I know who placed that letter of warning under the door. There is but one other man in camp who is capable of doing it. He knows all about the man in the shanty. He shall tell me all he knows and that right away."

Five minutes later Leo, the King-pin, stood in front of Sol Solstice's door and knocked.

A slight delay was had, when the door was opened by the Blasted Hand and Leo entered.

The eyes of the two men met as they came face to face and for a little while the King-pin looked at Sol with a strange glare.

"We got your letter," said the man of Crossbar.

"My letter?" stammered Sol. "Why—"

"You wrote it. Of course. We understand that perfectly. You seem willing to do us a favor and we are not slow to acknowledge it."

Sol Solstice, despite his calmness, was nonplused. He felt that he had been confronted by a man who was not to be hoodwinked and when he looked away he was sure the keen eyes of Leo were upon him.

"You say he means mischief—that he is plotting the destruction of the Triad?" continued the young King-pin.

Fairly cornered and betrayed by his face, Sol had to acknowledge that the letter came from him.

"I thought so," commented Leo. "I thought so from the very first. But you see the truce intervenes and nothing can be done till Leon comes back."

"What if his return should be delayed by circumstances?" asked Sol.

"We are not bound to wait on him indefinitely. We can break the armed truce under certain circumstances, which, as yet, do not confront us; but the terms of it are to wait till Leon comes."

Did Sol at that moment think of the duel in the mountains? Did he see in imagination a man lying dead where the wolves sneaked and the vultures hovered?

"Leon has gone off on what may be a long and a dangerous trail," said he, leaning over the table. "He may never come back. I believe in looking things in the face and meeting contingencies before they arise. You know what confronts a trailer among the hills—dangers human and otherwise."

Leo smiled at the man's eagerness.

"We know all this," he answered. "But you intimate that you know what this man would do."

"His mission is one of destruction."

"He seeks the overthrow of the Triad, eh?"

"That and more. He came with the intention of playing the coolest hand ever played here. He is Silk Ribbon Sam, the detective trailer of the Southwest. He knows the past and he is not alone."

"Not alone?"

"No. Mountain Morg, the man whose release he secured when you agreed to the armed truce, is his pard and sworn pard and spy. Where is this man now?"

Leo shook his head.

"He has sent him off. Ask him if he sent Mountain Morg off on Leon's trail. Don't you see that in his interest the truce should be a prolonged one? Can't you see, Captain Leo, that Silk Ribbon Sam will lengthen out Leon's return indefinitely if he can?"

The man of the Triad looked and said nothing.

"This serpent in Crossbar will carry out his oath to the letter. He will strike when it suits and not before. Mountain Morg's mission is undoubtedly to find Leon and prevent him from coming back until he is ready to play the last cool card in his silken hand. You may do what you think best in this case, but I know what I would do were I in your boots."

Leo sat silent for a full minute after these words. He seemed to see what Sol was after and when he looked up, catching the keen eyes on the other side of the table, he exclaimed:

"I know what you would do; there's no doubt of that. You wouldn't respect this truce another minute."

"I would make sure of life and liberty first."

"You would put out your hand and strangle the serpent in the gold nest."

Sol's eyes got a steely glitter.

"I don't give advice beyond what I think necessary. I am not one of you, but the last survivor of the small-pox smitten camp—Julius of the Blasted Hand," and the white streaked member was laid on the table where the eyes of Leo could look at it, and perhaps pity the adroit villain who was playing it so fine.

"I will see about it," said the King-pin, rising and looking down at Sol. "I will see what can be done, but this truce is sacred to me—no matter to whom made."

There was no answer.

All at once something fell upon the table, having been thrown through the open window.

Both men saw it at once.

The hand of Sol was the first to secure it, and he help up a bit of crumpled paper on which were here and there a dark red stain like that of blood.

"Was that for you, Julius?" asked Leo.

Sol opened the paper, and after one glance started with a face which lost every vestige of color.

"It seems to be for me," he said. "The fool thinks he can frighten me by work of this sort."

He did not hand the paper to Leo, but retained it, his hand closing around it as though it were as precious as his own existence. He sent a glance toward the window and Leo went to the door.

"Hello here!" cried the King-pin, as he stepped across the threshold. "If I don't see a dead man on the ground send me to Tartarus afoot!"

A dead man on the ground? The sentence went through Sol like a poniard.

One bound took him to the door, and the following moment he was looking down into the face which was upturned to the stars, and into which, like himself, Leo was staring with the eyes of a startled man.

A man lying in front of the shanty, with a ghastly wound across his temple, was something to startle the two men, and all at once Leo turned to Sol with fire in his eye.

"This man has just fallen dead," said he. "He must have been the person who threw the note upon the table. Let me see it."

The King-pin held out his hand and while Sol shrunk from it he placed the paper therein.

"It is a cool lie and a part of Silk Ribbon Sam's plan," he said as Leo bent to the light, and while he read, Sol stood at the door with his hands shut and one of them grasping something that protruded from his belt.

He was like a lion suddenly brought to bay.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PROOF OF THE SCARS.

"Is this a lie?" suddenly demanded Leo, turning upon the man who watched him from the door of the shanty.

The King-pin held the paper in his hand. He had made out the scrawl and was looking at Sol with eyes that seemed to penetrate his secrets.

"It is a lie, and one so poorly managed as to be transparent on the face of it. Do I look like Sol Dunbar—the man whose whipping was the talk of the desert years ago? Wasn't he a different looking man from me?"

Leo drew back and continued to look at Sol. "He was. He hadn't your build, if I remember him right; but who is that man?"

The speaker pointed at the body on the ground.

"You will have to ask Silk Ribbon Sam."

"Is this his play?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I will keep this. We will see something about this cool head who is paying some one back."

Sol was left alone with the dead. He turned back into the cabin and took a long breath.

"Jehul! what an escape!" he cried his voice in a quaver. "It was closer than the skin of one's teeth. My life hung by a thread thinner than those the spider spins. I thought I had left him in the mountains. He came back with vengeance in his heart and with a last effort wrote that accursed note which he intended for Leo, not for me. He threw it into the shanty and dropped dead where he lies now. Tony, the game failed though it came near success. It came too infernal near for me."

By and by men came and picked up the body. They carried it off, not to the Green Paradise which was not a deal-house, but toward the mountain, where it was laid in a shallow grave not far from the sheriff of Crossbar, and the men knew nothing of the dead one's identity.

No wonder the man in the shanty breathed freer. No wonder when he recalled the episode of the night he shuddered and thought of the extreme narrowness of his escape from exposure.

Tony had come back after the encounter in the mountain to throw into the shanty of his old-time friend and slayer the paper intended to open the eyes of the King-pins of Crossbar and to avenge his own taking off.

But did Leo believe the denial? Did the King-pin believe that Julius of the Blasted Hand was not the man whipped on the desert years ago?

Men may be compelled to believe some things for lack of proof to the contrary, and this might have been the case with Leo.

The young King-pin of the gold camp went home. He passed to a room on the second floor of the House of the Triad and threw himself upon a couch there.

It was now past midnight.

Leo did not fall asleep. He sprang up and went down the stairs.

Crossbar was silent save now and then when a sound came from the opposite side of the Plaza, and Leo turning his head in that direction, listened half a minute before quitting the steps.

He seemed the sole one abroad at that hour.

He passed down through the camp to the corral bounded by boulders where the few horses belonging to Crossbar were kept. He went among them, found one in the starlight and saddled it.

He was in the act of leading the animal from the corral when a footstep saluted his ears and he saw standing near a figure at sight of which he threw one hand to his revolver.

"You can't go!" said a voice, and the man came forward.

"Lionel, my brother!" cried Leo.

The two brothers stood face to face, the hand of one on the bridle-rein of the horse he was about to mount, and the other leaning forward with his dark eyes swimming in curiosity and eagerness.

"You cannot go. No matter what has come between us we are still the guardians of Crossbar and we are the Triad Court as well."

Leo dropped the bridle and took off the saddle.

The horse was turned loose and the brothers stood side by side, their shoulders touching and their eyes filled with singular light.

"You must stay. Leon will never return."

"Who told you this?" queried Leo.

"I have seen the future revealed as by the lifting of the veil that hides it. Leon has gone out to come back no more. We must end the truce."

This seemed to Leo's liking for he seized his brother's hand and cried:

"If I thought Leon would not come back—if I dreamed that the trail of Salome's child was a fatal one—the truce should be broken this hour!"

"It shall be so broken."

The voice of Lionel was harsh and tense.

"Come! We will break the truce. We will see that the man who came hither to avenge the death on the desert takes no advantage. The court must strangle the serpent before it can use its fangs."

They tramped back to camp without a word between them.

They entered it near the Triad House and passed beyond its doors. Lionel turned to the painting on the wall and threw back the curtain.

"Look and be perved anew," cried he, facing his brother. "Remember that our vengeance was just and that the hand of this man is lifted against us because it was so. There must be no faltering now. The Triad Court shall sit at once and that against the cool head who has played a hand cooler than Arnold's."

"I am ready. I am eager."

Lionel went to the table and sat down.

"I will write no charges. I will make them by word of mouth. I will play a hand quicker than his. This man is Silk Ribbon Sam, the detective whose mission is the avenging of the

death represented yonder. We will finish him first and then turn to the trail from which our brother comes not. We will find Salome's child if that child lives and there will be on you wall facing the picture there another just as terrible with its arid waste of sand and sky. You are ready, Leo? Your hand on this swoop of the mountain King-pins."

They grasped hands in the little room and their faces seemed to change to a crimson hue as their eyes met and flashed.

"What shall be done?" asked Leo.

"We will find him first. You looked into the face of Julius, the informer to-night. What do you think?"

"You shall read the dead man's message for yourself."

"Ah, he brought one then."

"It fell upon the table while I was talking to Julius, and then I found the dead man outside. I haven't the message—Julius kept that himself, as he proclaimed it a lie, but you shall have it and look at it in cold letters as I remember every word."

Leo sat down and in a minute had dashed off a copy of the note which Tony's last effort had thrown into the cabin.

"Heavens! was that the old man's charge?" cried Lionel.

"That was it. He called Julius the man we whipped on the desert. He called him Sol Dunbar, and the paper that bore the accusation was stained with his blood."

"He denied it, of course?"

"Most vehemently."

"He hasn't Dunbar's stature, nor his eyes if I recollect aright. But why would a dying man and a stranger throw such a paper upon the table?"

"I don't know," said Leo shaking his head.

"It is a mystery which Julius of the Blasted Hand ought to be eager to settle."

"I think so. It can be settled in a moment."

"You mean by an exhibition?"

"Yes."

"It must be settled. There is something about this—something that begets suspicion in spite of everything to the contrary. If Julius is not Sol Dunbar he will not shrink from the ordeal. Brother, that man must show his back."

The other nodded.

"The dead man might have been in Silk Ribbon's pay, and his last effort, with death at his heart-strings, may have been actuated by revenge. Time will reveal who gave him the death wound. But we will settle the other point first."

Resolute of purpose and bent on settling a question which was of vital importance, the Triad brothers left the house and tramped side by side through the early morning toward the shanty occupied by Sol Solstice.

They seemed the only citizens of Crossbar at large and their footsteps left their imprint on the glistening dust in the street.

They neared the door of Sol's hut and stopped for whispered consultation.

"Shall we play a sudden hand?" asked Leo.

"Yes. Let us give him a surprise and note the manner in which he takes it. Let him be prepared and he may disappoint us."

They reached the door and the hand of Lionel opened it.

In an instant a sudden "Who's there?" rung out in the semi-darkness and they saw by the light which Leo drew across the log, the figure of Sol sitting bolt upright on the couch upon which he had thrown himself after the exciting events of the night.

The Triad brothers advanced and Leo without ado lighted the lamp and held it above his head.

"Pardon this early visit, Julius," said Lionel with a grin at the corners of his mouth. "We are on a matter of business and you will do us the favor of baring your back for inspection."

The man on the couch seemed to grow rigid. His lips quivered and the blasted hand moved as it had not been seen to move before in Crossbar.

"Oh, we presume it's all right," continued Lionel, "but you see we must settle one little point which would seem to demand adjustment. If you are not the man called Sol Dunbar, why, of course your back is as free from scars as a babe's."

The hand of Leo fell at this moment upon Sol's shoulder and he started like a person touched by a snake.

"Come, we want you to witness the vengeance of Crossbar after the little ceremony here. The truce is broken and the Triad is about to deal with the detective from the Southwest."

Sol did not seem to hear the last words.

He continued to sit rigid on the edge of the bed and looking up at the two men in the lamplight, he felt that his last moment had come.

"Get up!" commanded Lionel. "You can stand, can't you?"

The Blasted Hand arose and protested.

"We can't take any man's word nowadays," answered Leo. "We must see what is beneath your shirt. If I recollect aright, the whip landed several times on Dunbar's shoulders. Eh, Lionel?"

Lionel nodded.

Sol breathed hard. He looked at the grim men in the chamber, but there was no mercy in their eyes.

"I knew Sol Dunbar—that is, I've seen him," said Sol. "He had black eyes, while any one can see that mine are gray."

Leo picked up the lamp and thrust it into Sol's face.

"Gray they are!" cried he, "but that proves nothing nowadays. I don't remember what color Dunbar's eyes were. I was looking all the time at his back. Open this man's shirt for him, brother."

The hand of Lionel alighted like an eagle on Sol's shoulder. It turned and caught at the strings that fastened the shirt at the throat, and the next moment, as the man retreated with a cry, the skin became suddenly exposed.

Sol tried to twist out of the iron grasp of the elder King-pin, but he failed in the attempt.

He was whirled half-way round and Leo thrust the lamp so near the flesh that the man started with a shriek of pain.

"Look!" cried Leo. "See the scars of a whipping! Where did you get those marks, man?"

Sol stood spell-bound before the men who had cornered him.

His tongue refused reply as he glared at them, and when he gripped the revolver with the blasted hand—a hand which until that time had been seen to close on nothing in the gold-camp—the finger of Leo pointed at it.

"A blasted hand, eh?" cried the King-pin of Crossbar. "Brother, this is the whipped wolf of the old desert."

A curse from Sol Solstice affirmed these words.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MAN IN AGONY.

SLEEPING quietly a short distance from these stirring scenes was the man against whom Sol Solstice had played his hand.

Silk Ribbon Sam, shut in for the night, which was now near its end, knew nothing of what was going on in the light of the little tin lamp which had revealed to the Triad brothers the welts on Sol's exposed back.

He did not hear the cry of agony which seemed to end in a curse of exasperation when he looked at the cool men and realized that his hand had been played in vain.

He did not see Sol as he tried to break from the iron grip of Lionel and shake his fist toward the cabin where he slept.

"You want a victim and yet you spare the man who is here to hunt you down!" He cried. "You hold against me that old grudge which you wiped out long ago with your whips on the desert. You will not whip me again, will you?"

At this confession Leo smiled and turned to his brother.

"You are Sol Dunbar?"

No answer.

"You were about to draw your revolver with the hand which you have carried at your side until now. You have told us that it was a blasted member, that it could hold nothing, yet your fingers wound about the butt of your six-shooter. You are a wily rascal, Sol Dunbar."

Sol was permitted to go back to the table, where he stood looking at the brothers and watching their faces change as if with glee as they seemed to recall the old whipping when they stood him against a horse and plied the whip till their hands tired of the fiendish sport.

"You will let him have his way," suddenly continued Sol. "You will take out your spite on me and let Silk Ribbon Sam play out his hand to the eternal detriment of Crossbar and its fortunes. That is the way of the world. By heavens! you would seem to deserve the victory he will win."

"The truce is broken!" said Lionel. "This man, as yet, knows it not, but he will soon learn."

"When did you break it?"

"Half an hour ago."

"Has Leon returned?"

"Leon will never return, therefore the armed truce is at an end."

"Then you have found Leon; then you know that he encountered Tony in the mountains and fought the duel?"

"Who fought the duel?" exclaimed both brothers in one breath.

"He fought with Tony, the man who fell dead at my door—the man whose infamous accusation revealed the scars on my back."

Half an hour elapsed ere the door of Sol's shanty opened and the unmasked villain was seen to emerge between the shoulders of the two King-pins.

A girl who saw them in the first flushes of another day fell back from the sight and for a moment wondered what had happened.

"What, Sol a prisoner?" she thought from the manner of his walk, and turning toward Silk Ribbon's shanty she seemed to scent danger for him.

In a little while she was rapping at the detective's door and Silk Ribbon was looking at her

while she told him in hasty sentences all she knew.

"They have broken the truce!" cried the girl.

"I am sure from what I have seen that a reign of terror has been inaugurated in Crossbar."

"Don't let it disturb you," said the detective coolly.

"I fear not for myself, but you are in the net."

"The net, girl?"

"In the jaws of the King-pins!"

Instinctively Sam glanced toward the Plaza and saw there the moving figures of more than a dozen men showing gray in the young light of day.

Something told him, to confirm Irma's warning, that the dreaded crisis of life in Crossbar had come, that they would soon stand face to face, hunter and hunted, and that swift work would follow the confrontation.

Silk Ribbon Sam dismissed the girl with the assurance that he was able to take care of himself. She passed down the street and with a backward look opened the door of her cabin and went in.

"It has come," said Irma. "The storm-cloud has broken and the deluge will come. They have broken the armed truce, and yet I don't see anything of Leon."

Minutes were hours to Irma shut up in the shanty with now and then a glance from the window at the dark groups of men on the Plaza and in front of the Green Paradise.

It was the lull before the tornado and the longer she waited without hearing the thunder the more she was puzzled.

Let us follow the two King-pins and their prisoner beyond the door of the Triad House.

Sol was ushered into the place with Leo and Lionel at his back.

He had been disarmed and now stood defenseless in the presence of the men whom he had come to kill for the scars he had carried for years.

There was nothing lofty about the revenge he had nursed all this time. His was the hatred of the hyena; his blood was the blood of the sneaking grave-yard robber and he was eager to come between Silk Ribbon Sam and his prey in order to pay the Three Captains back for the desert whipping which he richly deserved.

When he had been conducted to the room where was to be seen the painting of the desert death he was ordered to stand against one of the walls while Lionel took from a hidden niche near by some brushes and paints.

"We preserve in oil the faces of our victims," said he, looking at Sol.

"Merciful heavens! you don't intend to paint my portrait?" he exclaimed.

"I shall paint you as you are. Take off your hat!"

Sol with a curse threw his hat upon the floor at his feet and Lionel with a crayon drew the outline of his figure on the wall before him.

Leo with folded arms and watching the whipped wolf like a hawk, stood a few feet away and remained the silent spectator of the scene.

Lionel showed that he could handle the pencil with the ease of an artist, and in a short time Sol had been transferred to the wall in black and white. More than once he winced as he thought of what might follow the drawing. He felt that the death scene was not far off, and that his career was to fog out where he expected to score the revengeful triumph of his life.

"How do you like it?" suddenly cried Lionel, throwing the crayon upon the table and turning on his subject.

The portrait was a striking one and drawn true to life. Nothing had escaped his eye and Sol stood forth not as Julius, the Blasted Hand, but as the resuscitated Sol Dunbar of old days.

"It's pretty good eh?" the King-pin went on. "I will fill in with the brush after we have finished with you. A lifeless model is not a very good one, but I have you in my mind's eye and can finish the picture at any time. Open the door yonder, Leo."

Leo threw out his hand and a door which had escaped Sol's eye opened and revealed a room into which the doomed man looked with solicitude.

"Forward!" commanded Lionel pointing into the chamber.

"In a moment, I realize that I am going to my doom," cried Sol, stopping on the threshold of the apartment. "I feel that you intend to conclude my career, but I want a word. I want to tell you what Silk Ribbon Sam will do."

"He will not do what he came to do!" was the quick reply. "The truce is at an end and the detective—the avenger of the woman who lies yonder drinking from the warm veins of her steed—is as powerless now as though he were bound with steel. The eyes of the men of Crossbar are upon him and he is as good as dead."

"Thank God for that!" cried Sol. "I am glad to know that going to my death as I am, I can look upon the last trail this man's life. You don't want to give him rope, King-pins of Crossbar. You don't want to make another truce with him."

"There can be no second truce."

"Well and good. See that there is none."

Bringing his lips together behind the last word, Sol Solstice turned into the unknown room and walked to the middle of it.

In another moment the door behind him shut and he was enveloped in dense darkness, and not a sound came to his ears.

He stood there a little while and then addressed a question which was replied to by an echo which seemed to come to him from half a dozen places at once.

"I am alone. This is the death-chamber!" cried he.

Everything had been taken from him. He had been robbed of his last match, and while he felt his way round the room, using his fingers instead of eyes as best he could, he realized what failure meant in Crossbar.

"Condemned to rot here and never be found!" he grated. "Immured for the rest of my life with my scars unavenged! It is terrible! What have I accomplished? Why did I silence the woman who died in the tenth shanty to keep her from carrying out her revenge by slaying the men who sent Salome her friend to the death in the desert? This is all I have accomplished—the killing of Gold Grace!"

He came back to the door by which he had entered the place and ran his fingers all over it in a vain attempt to find a purchase by which he might attempt to force it.

Vain effort. The portal was as immovable as one of steel and all he got for his pain was torn fingers and a loss of strength.

He desisted at last. He fell back and cursed the folly which had brought Tony to Crossbar. He hated himself for not finishing the wanderer of the mountains, but, then, he never dreamed that he would return with death at his heart-strings and hurl into his cabin the death-warrant which by revealing the whipping on the desert, he compassed his doom.

Sol Solstice would have given Crossbar something to think about if he could have passed the closed portals of that dark room. He would have shown them that "the Blasted Hand" was an agent of death if he could have walked from the House of the Triad with six shooters in his hands; but it was not to be so.

He was to perish where he was and perhaps that room would never be opened and mankind would know nothing of his terrible end.

He saw the first arrows of daylight in the east when he entered the house and guessed that the morning was now far advanced.

All at once he started.

"They may give me company!" he suddenly exclaimed. "What if they put Silk Ribbon in here with me? What if they, with the invention of the devil, condemn us together? Wouldn't that be vengeance terrible? That would be the idea of fiends, and they are not human."

But time passed and the door did not open.

Sol Solstice heard nothing from the outer world. He stood at the door with his ear glued to the only crack he had discovered.

All at once he heard a noise that sent a thrill through his whole frame.

It was a pistol-shot.

There was no mistaking this sound for it was so clear and distinct and he had heard pistol-shots under many conditions.

What did it mean?

Just beyond him was the room where the picture was. His own portrait had been outlined on the wall by the eager pencil of Lionel, the outlaw artist, and he wondered if Silk Ribbon Sam was to be brought to the same chamber for a sitting.

After the shot came a season of silence and mystery.

Sol felt his breath going hard as he listened for some other sounds. The very silence of the stygian place was torture; it seemed to eat its way to his bones, and he was on the point of sinking to the floor with nameless terror, when he heard a door open.

Some one was in the room beyond.

He heard the booted heel of some one whom he could not see; and if that door had not been ironwood, he would have broken it down with the strength of a modern Samson.

But all at once he heard a voice.

"Well, I'm back. Now for the end of the whole dark drama!"

"Great heavens!" cried Sol. "Leon has come back. Leon! I thought Tony killed him in the mountains."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STORY OF THE DESERT.

ONCE more the Triad was complete.

Leon had returned—Leon, the second brother, he who had gone out to find the trail of Salome's child, swearing not to return until he had followed it to the end.

Standing in the room where Sol Solstice heard him and entirely alone, the handsome sport of Crossbar had thrown his hat to the floor and was gazing at the portrait drawn on the wall by Lionel.

"What does that mean?" he cried. "I have seen that face before. Lionel draws like one inspired. He drew that face on the wall. I wonder whose it is? And where is the subject?"

His query was not answered and he threw

himself into a chair and looked around as if he expected to see the door open admitting either Lionel or Leo.

Leon had reached the House of the Triad almost without being seen. He had gained the place of mystery without more than one pair of eyes to watch him, and when he crossed the steps he was seen by a girl whose thoughts followed him to the room of the desert death.

Irma, wondering what had brought the King-pin back at that hour, was about to run over to Silk Ribbon Sam's shanty for the purpose of acquainting him with her discovery when a scene stopped her.

The detective emerged from his cabin and walked toward the Plaza.

It was like courting death, and Irma stood pale and trembling at the man's presumption.

"He is walking into the trap!" she cried with clasped hands. "He will find himself in the snare they have made for him. He will follow Julius of the Blasted Hand and end where that ended."

But Sam kept on. The Plaza lay before him and the door of the Green Paradise opened for him like the paw of a lion.

With a tread that dignified the occasion he entered the place and his presence there startled those who were in the place.

They rose from their recumbent positions along the counter, and the earliest gamblers turned to look at his demeanor as he came down the aisle between the tables, nodding pleasantly to all who caught his eye.

Behind him, treading in the sawdust which he had just pressed, came another man who watched him like a hawk.

Derringer Dick, the new high sheriff of Crossbar, with an official look, saw Sam reach the counter and before he could speak the detective's hand waved over the crowd.

"Men of Crossbar, the truce existing between myself and the Three Captains is broken!" he exclaimed.

"Jehosaphat! just what I was about to proclaim," muttered Dick. "He's taken the very words out of my mouth and I'm stumped."

All were looking at Silk Ribbon Sam.

"The truce has been broken by the King-pins of Crossbar," he went on. "It was not to have been disturbed till Leon came back and I am not the party to its breaking. I want to say to all of you that while I have no hand in what has just happened, I will not shrink from what may follow."

Derringer Dick pushed forward, his burly figure swinging down the sawdust aisle, and in the middle of the place he stopped and took off his hat.

"I proclaim the ending of the armed truce between the Triad Court and Captain Jason so-called!" rung out his voice.

"I have proclaimed that myself, but you can give it official tone," answered Silk Ribbon Sam.

In a moment Dick had turned upon the detective.

"I proclaim a session of the Triad Court this afternoon at two o'clock. Let every citizen of Crossbar attend and witness the proceedings of great moment to all. Long live the liberties of Crossbar!"

This, the usual ending of the proclamations of the mountain sheriff, provoked a smile, for all knew it was a travesty at best, for no liberty either of act or conscience existed in the camp.

Derringer Dick went to the counter upon which, prepared for him, stood the sheriff's drink, and lifting the glass above his head, he exclaimed:

"Here's confusion to the enemies of Crossbar, great and small!"

Then he turned and passed out, leaving behind him a silence which lasted for several moments.

Scarcely had Derringer Dick vanished when the doorway was again darkened by a figure and Silk Ribbon's face got a smile, but suddenly grew calm.

Lionel was there. The eldest of the King-pins stood in the door, his cold, stern face turned toward the spot where the detective stood and his mien that of a determined man.

"You have heard the high sheriff," said he. "The Triad will hold its last session this afternoon."

"Its last session?" said half a dozen voices.

"Its last one, men of Crossbar. Let every one of you be present. I offer no explanation now."

His eye caught the look of the man with a mission. He looked into the face of Silk Ribbon Sam, seemed to catch the gleam that lighted up his eye, and then turned away.

Not a word had passed between them, but all seemed to know that the "last session" of the dread Court of Crossbar was in some manner connected with the life of the invader of the camp.

"That means you, sir," said a voice behind Sam, and he looked over his shoulder to see the lips of the little one-eyed barkeeper trembling with the last sentence.

"It means me. Well, I'm willing," was the answer. "Men of Crossbar, will you listen for a few moments to me?"

He stood free of the counter now and all saw something in his eye that held them spell-bound.

They came forward till they stood in front of him and became silent as they touched elbows, watching him with the interest of children instead of men.

"Years ago there lived miles from this camp a young girl who had three brothers," said Sam. "It was in a land that was as fair as the Garden of Eden, but the Serpent inhabited it. The maiden grew to womanhood watched by the three brothers who were wild and cool, like all men who lived where they did. Time came when the girl was wooed and won by a man who was in every way her equal. She loved him, but the cardinal sin was committed when she failed to ask her brothers if she could become the wife of the man to whom she had plighted her maiden troth."

"The girl broke the vow the three forced from her and one day fleeing with her lover, she became his wife. They crossed the borders of the snake-infested Eden and found peace and happiness for a time where they thought they would not be molested by the vengeance of the three hot-heads left behind. But there are trails in that region as there are everywhere. There are catcl and sand as there are in all the beautiful Southwest with its stretch of desert and blue sky. The three brothers took the trail. With the ingenuity of fiends they hunted for the hidden paradise and found it. They swam rivers and climbed mountains in their search, for they found that the trail was tortuous and led them a long and weary chase. With the pertinacity of devils they tracked down the husband-lover and ran him from cover. They did not give him a chance to die pistol in hand as he would have died, for he had the courage of a lion; but they stole upon him at night and ran him down under the vault of heaven."

"The banded three—the human tigers whose awful oath which even reached their sister had been taken amid the sun-scorched desert—caught their prey at midnight. They took him, Heaven alone besides themselves knew whither for months—across the open and buried him in the sand with nothing above the horrid waste but his uncovered head. And what was this man's crime? What but love?"

There was a forward movement by the rough crowd in front of Silk Ribbon Sam. Not a word had interrupted him since the beginning of his narrative, and after taking breath he resumed.

"They turned back, these three fiends did, to find the wife and sister. But she was gone. It seemed as though Heaven had stooped and snatched her from their hands. Then came another oath as terrible as the first. They swore to find her if it took them to the ends of their lives. Blood was nothing to these wretches in the shape of man. They were baffled for more than three years. They went from trail to trail. They slept not, as it seemed, night or day; they wanted blood and that blood their sister's!"

"What had become of the missing one? I need not ask what had become of the man buried alive in the desert. A traveler across the waste found a skull which the beaks of the vultures had denuded of flesh, and it was grinning at the sky amid the burning sand. Yes, the girl, the runaway bride, whose fault was love, eluded these three men. She eluded them for years, and though she had not forgotten the dead, she had again become a wife. She had given her hand to another—to a man whose name has been heard by some before me in this house. She was as happy as one could be under the changed circumstances. She felt all the time that the sworn three were on her track. She clung close to her rough bandit husband—he was little else—but that did not save her."

"One night she was torn from the camp where he kept her. The vultures which had been hovering in the vicinity for some time found her and swooped. They came down upon the corral and their hands as merciless as their hearts seized her despite her pleas for mercy. It was then a ride across the open. It was a fierce gallop in the teeth of the night to the confines of morning. It was a long ride far across the desert to a spot where they thought they could carry out the revenge which had gained power and fiendishness through the long years of disappointment."

"They held no trial. They steeled their hearts to the cries of the hunted one, and when she stood before them and reminded them that her mother was theirs and that they had been nurtured at the same breast, they laughed in her face and thrust before her the unpardonable sin of her life—her marriage with one whom they hated."

"I would hide even from you the scene that followed this appeal of beauty and innocence. I would draw here the veil which hides the past to those who would know it not in all its hideousness. But I dare not. My mission would be unfulfilled if I stopped at the end of the chapter."

"Down over the sands glistening in the already hot rays of the sun rode a woman whose face had on it the seal of death. Her steed staggered as he moved along. In all the open there was no water and only here and there the ghostly

shadow of a starved cactus. It was a ride under a coppery sky and a blazing sun. The black horse felt the terror of his last journey. The woman with welded lips and dry looked up at the wings that came lower as the moments waned, and smiled as she counted the narrowing circles. At last upon the sand sunk the steed and she, lashed to him in a manner which had prevented her from guiding him, fell with his last stagger."

"Then, as if she hoped even amid that scene, she tore open his heated neck with her hands and drank of the red current of life that poured from the veins. It was the last despairing effort of the girl who had loved despite the admonition of the three fiends who were bandits of the border. The steed was the first to perish there. The gallant horse was the first to go into the darkness of death, but the woman lived on. The blood saved her for a time. It saved her till night with its breaths of coolness came over the scene. It saved her, I say, till another person who was not a foe reached the spot and stooped over the dying creature. That man heard from her lips in short, terrible sentences the story of her life. He listened while the desert crickets chirped to the tale of vengeance and terror. He looked down into the face of the poor creature and heard it all, and with his hand in hers he looked into the eyes from which life was fleeing and registered in heaven an oath that he would be her avenger."

"The wife got a better burial than the husband. Her grave was a lonely one, but it was not robbed by the sneaking wolf and the swooping vulture. Men of Crossbar, the story is done. What will you have?"

The suddenness of the ending of Silk Ribbon Sam's story startled the crowd.

They looked at one another and then turned again to the speaker.

A singular silence followed the last word.

Suddenly some one cried out:

"These demons shall die if they still live! Where are they?"

At that moment some one appeared in the doorway and the crowd turned.

"It is Leon. Long live Captain Leon!" cried a dozen voices.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FERRET AND KING-PIN.

THE sudden appearance of the King-pin in the doorway of the Green Paradise seemed to take from the minds of Silk Ribbon's audience every trace of the thrilling story of the desert crime.

Leon had returned to his own and they were his slaves, as of yore.

For some time the handsome sport stood in the doorway and then advanced toward the counter near which Silk Ribbon Sam stood, watching him and wondering what would take place when their eyes should meet.

Perhaps Leon had stopped long enough at the door to have heard the story he had told, but if he had, he did not betray himself as he came in.

The King-pin stopped at the counter and asked the men of Crossbar what they would have. In a moment there was a surging forward of dark shirts, and bottles were set out as they crowded to the bar.

Silk Ribbon Sam looked at Leon and at that moment caught his eye.

They stood face to face again and in the eye of the returned nabob was a look which the detective could not fathom.

It was evident, though, that the King-pin had come back with his desires unsatisfied; he had not found the trail of Salome's child.

"Here yet, eh?" said Leon, as Silk Ribbon bowed to him. "I thought you might be gone, but I am glad to find you still in Crossbar."

Glad, was he? His words might mean more than they implied on the surface, and Sam, drinking with the rest the health of the returned King-pin, watched his opportunity and stole from the place.

His story may have left some traces in the hearts of his tough audience, and but for the appearance of Leon there is no telling what sort of demonstration might have been had.

He went back to his shanty.

The Triad Court of Crossbar had been convened by the proclamation of the high sheriff. It was to come together "on important business," and he could guess what it was.

He had thrown down one of the cool and best cards in his hand. He had told the story of Salome and her vengeful brother; he had clothed it in simple language, even saying that her brothers had been bandits and locating them in a manner which would have done for ears not decidedly obtuse.

Did Crossbar understand? Did the men of the mountain camp see through the tale?

Time would tell.

Silk Ribbon Sam was in the cabin when a footstep fell without the door and looking up as it opened he saw there the man he had left at the Green Paradise.

Leon had come to see him—Leon, the man accused by him of knowing the whereabouts of Salome's child.

The door was shut by the dark hand of the second King-pin, and as he came forward, his eyes fixed on the detective, he seemed to challenge him to mortal combat.

Leon looked at the empty stool alongside the table and dropped upon it.

"I am back, but you have seen this before now," said Leon. "I am back from the trail in the mountains."

"That is apparent to me. You did not stay long."

"No. I am back to face you, Captain Jason. I have come to ask you to reveal the secret which I believe you carry in your bosom."

There was no reply and Silk Ribbon waited for the cool sport to go on.

"We should not be enemies, yet foes we are, and all the powers that be cannot make us otherwise. We are foes to the death and though they call you Captain Jason in a narrow circle, you have another name. You are Silk Ribbon Sam."

The detective, looking at the calm eyes that confronted him, replied not, as if he wanted the speaker to go to the full length of his tether.

"The door is shut!" continued Leon. "I did not lock it for there are no locks in Crossbar. Neither does the painting of the death in the desert mar your wall. You will listen to me while I tell you a story."

Silk Ribbon bowed and continued to watch the face which had changed color, being white now and almost bloodless.

"There are out yonder trails as dark and mysterious as the one I started out to find. I have come back from one of them—come back to you whom I now face with neither of my brothers about, and here in the solitude of this shanty with no eye on the watch we will talk and discuss the near future and its plays."

"Go on."

"I went to the trail confident of tracking down the child of the woman who died on the sand drinking from the neck of her horse the hot current of life. This child is the evil genius of our lives—this offspring, born when we knew it not and hidden by some hocus-pocus, must be found and will be! The wealth we have accumulated as the King-pins of Crossbar would fall to this child if we were to die without issue. The heir of Salome would become our heir and he or she would become the richest person in the Wild West. I have been to the trail, but the track which I thought I had found I lost as suddenly, and that is why I am back to Crossbar."

"They have released Mountain Morg. This man who preceded you to Crossbar has been turned loose by the armed truce which was entered into after my departure. He went to the mountains and there he has played a hand which, for coolness and cleverness, marks him a man of cunning."

"You saw him, then?"

"I saw the dark man of mystery. I was on a trail which from certain indications led me to believe that I had found the one I sought, when who should step between me and success but Mountain Morg. Did you send him out after the release? Did you send this man to the trail after the truce and tell him to protect the young man who was exiled by Lionel and Leo without my consent?"

"What if I did send Morg to the mountains?" asked Silk Ribbon Sam.

"Then you do know where the child is?" cried Leon. "Then, Captain Jason you do know where is to be found the child of Salome, the woman who disgraced her race. You shall tell me here and now!"

Leon was standing erect now, his face seamed with resolution and his hands which were not gloved shut in their tiger softness and white.

Across the table looking at him with fearlessness stood the man of the long trail.

Silk Ribbon Sam knew that the crisis was fairly on—that it was now a fierce fight to the death, and, shut up in the den of the mountain lion, a situation he had sought of his own accord, he was resolved to play through the hand he had obtained.

"What is it you want to know?" he asked.

"The truth! In the first place, you sent Mountain Morg to the trail."

"I sent him out."

"In the teeth of the Triad Court you sent him out to baffle me on the trail of my life?"

"Yes."

Leon came round the table. His head thrown back, showed plainly his flashing eyes, and his hand lifting suddenly showed the man of the sworn trail a bowie which his hand encircled with the grip of the gladiator.

"The door is shut," he cried. "But one of us need go out and greet the sun."

"Captain Leon, you are ready for the end. I see that desperation and the ghost of the poor creature who died on the desert stand before you and with her white hand beckons you to Tartarus."

"That is proof enough concerning your identity! You are the man who a year ago dropped in upon us at the Red Serpent in another camp and by a word stirred up the settlement until we had to saddle and quit the place at midnight."

The detective smiled.

"You are the person who dropped that mysterious note on the Plaza of Gold-Butte City and then decamped, leaving us to make an explanation which nearly cost us our lives. These acts were but the preliminaries, Captain Jason, as I will call you. They were but the fore-runners of what you had in store for us here. Now that you have come face to face with us, thinking that you can win over to your aid the slaves we have in Crossbar, we find you playing a hand the counterpart of which no man has ever played before. The narrative you spun to the men in the Green Paradise was as startling as unique. They never heard the like of it before. They will never hear a story like it again. Captain Jason, as I have repeated, the door is shut. You are armed?"

"But you forget that Derringer Dick, your new high sheriff, has convened court by proclamation and that we are to have the last session of the Triad this afternoon."

"There need be no session!" cried Leon. "But one of us need walk from this shanty."

"You forget that the secret of the lost child of Salome might die with me."

"If it dies with you we will find means for getting at it!"

"Then you believe that I am not the sole custodian of that secret."

"Others hold it. From what I saw in the mountain, I believe that Mountain Morg carries it in his bosom. We will hunt that worthy down and the hands of the Triad, closing in on him, will tear from him the secret of Salome's child. Come! We will have it out here. If you walk from this shanty to face the Triad it shall be with the blood of Leon of Crossbar on your hands. Will not that be carrying out a part of your oath?"

Silk Ribbon Sam saw the situation that confronted him.

He looked from the window, but no shadow passed it nor rested for a moment on its panes.

The tall figure of the mountain King-pin stood before him and the hand that gripped the long-bladed bowie looked as formidable as any he had ever seen.

"The secret or fight?" said Leon. "I want one or the other and you shall choose."

The detective seemed to smile as he heard these words.

"If the secret is delivered it would still be fight," he said.

"It would be a meeting of the Triad, for that cannot be avoided."

Sam seemed to consider.

The sun mounting higher was bringing round the hour for the session of the merciless court.

He heard no sound without the cabin; all was still as if by mutual consent all were holding aloof from the shanty.

"You shall have the secret," he suddenly said.

Leon started.

"I don't see why it should be kept longer from you. The time seems to have come for the revealment and while I am ready to meet the Court of Crossbar I do not tell you the secret hoping thereby to escape the blow it would deal."

Leon fell back with breathless interest. He did not take his eyes from Silk Ribbon Sam.

"The secret of Salome's child shall be yours, and you may go back to the trail whenever it suits you. The woman who died on the desert lived long enough to find an avenger. She lived to tell him the story of her life and to make him her friend and sworn Nemesis."

"You told that much to the pards at the Green Paradise," impatiently exclaimed Leon.

"Hear, then, what I did not impart to them," said Sam. "Know that the child of Salome's is a man grown—know, Leon of Crossbar, that you have looked into his eyes a thousand times while you ruled in this camp with a hand of steel."

Leon was breathing hard.

"Oscar is that child."

"Oscar?"

"The young man of Crossbar, the exile of this camp, is the offspring whom you three have hunted all these years, for something seems to have told you that Salome gave birth to a child during the years you lost sight of her. That child became a waif, though, ere she died, as Captain Dan's wife, the hapless mother found him out and even watched over him like an eagle. Oscar is her child. He is the one whose blood you want. He is the heir of his three uncles!"

The lion of Crossbar had fallen back to the door, and from there was staring at Silk Ribbon Sam like a maniac.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE EXILE COMES BACK.

FOR a time let us get beyond the confines of the mountain camp with the dread court on the eve of its last session, and transport ourselves to a spot some distance from the wild men and scenes it contains.

Deep in the mountains where the peaks rise far above the tallest trees and from their tops

look down upon the broken country beneath, stands a young man who seems to have gone to the end of a bitter journey.

The shades of night which are falling round him conceal the surrounding scenery and seem to blot out the trail which he has followed nearly all day.

Above him tower the rocks of the gray walls, and beneath, the line of bushes that mark the fringe of more unknown land is just visible.

Oscar, the exile of Crossbar, has reached that point after a long and weary trail.

He knew something of the surrounding region, but he knew nothing of its real mysteries.

He found himself a hunted exile driven from the spot where he had been sheltered for some time, and forced to remain away from Irma on pain of death.

He thought of many strange things while he leaned against the rocky wall and felt the warm breath of another night on his cheeks.

He recalled the important rounds in his ladder of life. He remembered the veiled woman who had encountered him during his hermitage on the slopes of Old Moses, the mountain in the South, and how he had watched for her and her black steed on the top of the peak, only to find there the gold cross which had fallen into Silk Ribbon Sam's hands, and how that man, who was to him a mystery, had said that he knew who she was.

These things came back to the young exile of Crossbar while he watched the shades grow deeper and darker, and at last when all was one shadow from which he seemed to emerge only to meet rayless midnight, he started on again.

All at once he stopped.

"Why not go back and face them all? This is worse than a thousand deaths!" he cried impulsively. "To perish here with some one in possession of my life secret is infinitely more torture than the human soul can stand. Which way is the back trail to Crossbar? Which way shall I turn at this stage of the game to find my way back to the camp and its Three Captains? I will try. I think I know the trail which brought me to this region."

Resolute of purpose, the young exile of Crossbar turned back.

Perhaps he should have turned back before. He had come a long distance; he had tracked the mountain lion down the trail which the soft feet made and more than once in moments of despair he had wished that the animal would turn and spring upon him.

In his wanderings this far Oscar had met no human being. He had encountered no friend nor foe in civilized garb, but this did not deter him.

Hours passed. He saw the sun rise and set again. He saw the shades of the second night come on and believed that he was not far from Crossbar.

Suddenly mounting a peak he looked downward and saw the lights of Crossbar. He knew by the arrangement of the lights where he was and a bright one told him where the men of the gold-camp wrestled with the gaming tiger over the cloths of the Green Paradise.

The youth had no fears now. To go down and face the men of the lion's law was to meet whatever was in store for him there with the coolness which had come to him during his wanderings.

He began to descend the mountain. He stopped now and then and seemed to take a survey of the camp.

Oscar might have gone back even then and thus avoided the perils that lay in ambush among the shanties of Crossbar.

Mountain Morg had missed him, but he did not know that the Pinte Pansy had been sent out to protect him. He had missed this very friend whose hand and nerve would have come between him and the grip of the Triad, and now within sight of Crossbar, he needed help and counsel.

But Oscar kept on.

He thought of his old shanty and wondered if he could reach it unseen.

If he was in exile they would not think of his return and no one would dream that, instead of being in the mountains, he was there in the old cabin, looking out upon the scenes being enacted on the wild stage.

Like a ghost he crept down the street hugging the darker shadows and at last reaching the old shanty.

What if it was inhabited! What if during his absence some one had taken possession of it?

He would not go back now. His one desire was to get back to Crossbar and, near Irma, fight out with the Three Captains the feud between them.

The latch of the shanty yielded and Oscar walked inside. It was still and dark. Nothing was seen or heard to disturb him and he felt his way through familiar scenes, meeting here and there pieces of furniture which seemed to tell him that nothing had been misplaced since his departure.

He was home again. The old shanty seemed to welcome him, and he wondered what the morning would reveal.

After a while he went to the window and looked out upon the street.

From his house he could see the Plaza, scene

of so many stirring events, and the open door of the Green Paradise was also visible.

It was a comfort to be back there, even though he was hemmed in by death.

He felt that he should not sleep that night. He would remain awake, for there was no telling what would happen and he could be wide awake when the danger fell.

Oscar watched the lights of the saloon until long after midnight.

It was the night before the events of the last chapter and the return of Leon was still a secret in the camp. It was known only to Leon and Sol Solstice, the man shut up in the dark room of the Triad House, and the story by Silk Ribbon Sam in the Green Paradise had not been told.

Oscar would have kept his resolution not to close his eyes that night if nature had not asserted her powers. He would have stood at the little window and watched the night depart if Morpheus had not taken possession of his weary senses.

He went to the old cot and threw himself upon it. In the twinkling of an eye sleep came to him and when he opened his eyes lo! daylight was streaming in at the window and its broad beams lay upon his bed.

Oscar sprang up and went to the window. He looked out again upon the day scenes of Crossbar and distinguished the men who passed before him.

To be shut up there so near Irma and those in whom his thoughts were centered was more torture than ever.

He heard the proclamation of Derringer Dick, the new sheriff of Crossbar; he caught sight of that worthy as he came from facing Silk Ribbon Sam in whose face he had flung his emphasized mandate, to go back to the shanty and prepare for the last session of the Triad Court.

The young exile of Crossbar suddenly caught sight of another figure which attracted him more than any other. He saw Irma come forth from her house and stand for a little while before the door.

Her face was turned toward the shanty where he stood, his cheeks on fire and his eyes starting from his head. Irma so near and seen by him yet he durst not speak!

Suddenly, after another long wait, he caught sight of the figure of Leon as that worthy walked toward the detective's abode.

"When did that man return?" cried Oscar. "What brought Leon back to Crossbar? And now he enters Silk Ribbon Sam's house? What mission takes him thither? I would like to know."

Yes, Oscar, if you could but listen at the door or stand beyond it you would hear a secret which would send your blood hot through every vein and render you insane.

Leon came forth again. He walked toward the mines and vanished.

Oscar saw the King-pin as with shut hands and face as white as death he passed the shanty to disappear among the bonanzas of the mountain lair.

But why did he start after Leon had vanished?

He was looking down the street, his face turned toward the Plaza when a man came toward the cabin with his eyes to the ground.

Oscar had slipped down the same street through the night and perhaps his feet had left tracks in the dust.

If he had left the trail there and the keen eyes of a Crossbar tiger should discover them, woe to him! There would be discovery terrible, and the door of the shanty would be thrown open and he would stand face to face with the men whom we knew were his deadly enemies.

The man looking at the dust was known to him—a mean, sneaking character of the camp.

On he came. His eyes seemed to glitter as he inspected something in the dust.

All at once, however, Oscar saw the man stop and go back.

It was a moment of suspense. Had he been discovered? If so, why not go out and boldly face them all?

"No, there is a chance that I can remain here till night," said he. I won't precipitate matters. I can see Irma when night comes and learn all about the events that followed my exilement. I will stay till they have discovered me."

He waited, but the man, the tracker, did not come back. It seemed to Oscar that fortune had interposed in his behalf. He had been saved on the verge of doom and he was correspondingly happy.

It was a long morning to the penned-in youth.

Every now and then the figure of Irma came in sight and he was eager to tell her where he was by some sign which would escape every eye but hers, but caution and safety held him back.

All at once a footstep halted at the door.

Bracing himself for the ordeal at hand the exile of Crossbar stood near the door with his hands shut and his face white and tensely drawn.

He had seen no one approach the shanty and was at a loss to know who was there.

The door opened and Irma was there!

Had fortune or fate sent the girl to the cabin

to unearth him and send him back into the grip of the Triad Court?

Oscar's cry startled Irma and she sprang in only to seize his wrist and then look at him like a person bereft of reason. She was frightened and full of terror.

"My God! you here?" she exclaimed. "You have come back into the lion's den. You have returned to perish if the court condemns its victims to day."

"Its victims?" echoed the youth.

"Julius and Silk Ribbon Sam."

"Are they in its power?"

"Julius is at the house of the Triad and Silk Ribbon is in his own shanty. He told them all."

"He told who all?"

"The parads of Crossbar. He told the story of the desert death at the Green Paradise and all know what brought him to this camp. His mission is a secret no longer. He wants the persons of the Three Captains. Silk Ribbon Sam is the sworn avenger of the woman who, dying in the desert, made him swear to avenge her. They listened to him with rage in their hearts and at the end of the story Leon came back. It is a terrible story. There was a hunt and a banishment to the wastes of the border and, horror of horrors! the three men who played the role of merciless angels were the woman's brothers."

Oscar listened with his lips glued together and his eyes fastened upon the fair speaker.

"Did you hear him, Irma?" he asked.

"I did not, but one who did told me all. There is a smoldering volcano underneath the crust of Crossbar. The men have thought over the story told by Silk Ribbon the avenger. They have put this and that together."

"Well?"

"But they are the slaves of the Three Captains; they are bound to Lionel, Leo and Leon by an oath which cannot be broken!"

"Then," cried Oscar, "Heaven help the cool avenger, Sam!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF THE BLASTED HAND.

"HEAVEN help the cool avenger, Sam!"

Well might such a sentence fall from Oscar's lips.

It was fully warranted by the existing circumstances, and the young pair who stood in the cabin and heard the sounds that filled the camp might turn their heads to the door and wait for the coming of the terror.

Irma told the exile all she knew about the events that had followed his departure from Crossbar, and now that he was back—back in the lair of the lion, they would meet their fate together, for they doubted not that the mandate of the stern court would deal mercilessly with both.

Why should it not deal with her? Had she not rejected the love-making of Leo, the King-pin, and told him that his brother Lionel would fare no better at her hands? Was this not sufficient to send her into the net and make her one of the victims of the Triad?

After awhile the girl stole back, perhaps unseen, to her home to await in its shadows the coming of events.

Silk Ribbon Sam had seen her go to the boy's cabin, but he did not suspect the truth. He knew nothing of Oscar's return, and while he watched the Plaza from his window, waiting there for the opening of the last act of the mountain drama, he wondered what had become of the exile.

Leon had walked from his presence after the revelation of the secret, suddenly dumfounded by it.

He now knew that Oscar was Salome's child, and that for years he had looked into the young man's face without a suspicion of the truth. He had challenged Silk Ribbon Sam to a duel in the shanty, but with the revelation in his ears, he had thrown the knife to the floor, declaring that he would not interfere with the Triad Court, and that, as it had been convened in extra session, he would let the hand of the Triad take that vengeance which belonged to it.

Thus Silk Ribbon had been left alone again.

He saw Leon walk away with a step that seemed to lack the force of his old tread.

He watched him until he was no longer visible and then went back to the table from which the King-pin's entrance had startled him.

Leon proceeded direct to the House of the Triad. The sun was fast mounting the slopes of the eastern sky, and ere long the shadows would announce the arrival of noon.

Leon sought out the room of the desert scene, and threw up the curtain that hid the painting.

Then, falling back, he folded his arms and stood in the middle of the room like a king, his eagle eyes fastened on the scene, and his face white and expressive.

He was quite alone. No footstep came to the solitude of that spot to disturb him. He seemed to dwell on the painting, as if it had some weird fascination for him; he saw the shadows of the vulture wings as they fell on the sand, and seemed to count the scattered clumps of cacti, which the brush had depicted here and there, like sentries in the waste.

For more than an hour the King-pin stood

there looking at the terrible picture, and when he moved it was toward the wall in order to get a closer look at the face of the desert victim.

"He says he came up before she died!" suddenly said Leon. "He declares that he heard her last words and that she made an avenger out of him. Is that true? Did he find her dying on the desert, and was it his hand that smoothed her brow ere the vultures touched her with their dark pinions? I can't believe this. Yet, Lionel ought to know."

He turned as if he expected to see the person whose name he had just spoken, but the door did not open and Lionel did not come.

"What does this mean?" he cried, seeing something on the opposite side of the chamber, and springing forward he stopped at the door beyond which Sol Solstice had been conducted. "Sealed by order of the Triad!" he read on the door, and then his eyes seemed to stare at the portal in the wall.

If that door had been sealed by order of the Triad he was bound to respect it; he dared not investigate, hardly to ask why it had been sealed, though perhaps it was his right to know. He stepped aside and looked again at the painting.

Leon seemed to grow whiter than ever.

"Alive and exiled—her son!" he was heard to say. "Sent into the mountains and after a long residence under our very eyes. He did not have his mother's face, yet one day I started when I saw him, but that was long ago. I can go back to the trail now. We can find this hated person and give these walls a companion picture. Lionel shall paint another death scene here. His brush shall portray a scene as terrible as the one yonder, for our oath reaches to her offspring. She was hunted down for her disobedience and her son shall be found if the trail leads through the fires of pandemonium."

There was no mercy in the heart of this oath-bound nabob. He might have loved his sister when life was young, and the paths of youth were bordered with flowers, but time had effaced all this and he was Leon, the merciless King-pin of Crossbar, the mountain den.

He left the curtain up and sat down at the table.

"To-day sits the court for the trial of Silk Ribbon Sam," he said, as he took writing materials from a drawer. "I am not needed here. Leo and Lionel are equal to the emergency and they will be as implacable as the occasion demands. They will hold court after the old manner and this sworn Nemesis will feel the teeth of the King-pins. I will go back to the trail. Now that I know where he is to be found, I will go off on a second mission, this time not to be deluded by Mountain Morg nor turned aside by circumstances. I will go the underground way, passing the dead man who guards the mine, and coming up to daylight, as I did before."

Leon wrote rapidly for a few minutes. He closed at last and sealed the document with red wax in which he left the impression of a serpent-headed ring.

When all this was done he rose and thrust the letter into a receptacle hanging over the table and turned once more to the picture.

"I won't come back this time till the work has been done—till I have found the son of the woman who broke her vows and disgraced her race. Farewell! I go to finish the life-hunt of the Three Captains of Crossbar, and when I come back the last card of the detective-avenger will have fallen from dead hands and the reign of the King-pins be established forever!"

Leon waved his hand at the painting and went to the trap-door in the floor.

He had raised it when the door across the room opened and he looked up.

Side by side in the doorway stood Leo and Lionel.

Leon fell back from the trap and left it open.

"Which way, brother?" asked Lionel, coming forward with a glance at the painting.

Leon straightened in the middle of the room and raised his hand.

"I have found the trail at last," said he.

"I have found the trail of the child of your traitress," was the quick reply. "I know where to look for her son."

"The child was a boy, then?"

"It was a boy and he has reached man's estate. He has been under our eyes these three years and, fools that we were, we have helped him over man a rough place, never dreaming that he was the offspring of the viper. The court will sit to-day as proclaimed. I am not needed here, but the trail yonder demands my presence."

"The court will sit," said Lionel, "but it will be its last session."

"How its last session?"

Leo and his elder brother exchanged swift looks.

"The Triad is in the throes of dissolution," was the answer. "It has outlived its usefulness and when we have struck the detective—the man known as Silk Ribbon Sam—it will pass out of existence and Crossbar will have no dread Tribunal."

Leon turned to the sealed door and suddenly covered it with his finger.

"Sealed by order of the Triad?" he cried.

"What does that mean?"

"The whipped wolf is yonder," said Lionel. "The man who is dangerous because his tactics are those of the hyena, has passed that portal and is lost forever to the world."

"I would see him."

"Why, brother? Why open the door after it has been sealed by order of the Triad?"

"I know, but I would look once more at the man we whipped on the desert! Open the door?"

Biting his lips, Lionel advanced and broke the seal on the door.

Did the man inside hear the click of the steel key on the lock? Was he leaning against the door listening to music which might bring hope to his soul, or had he passed beyond the pale of human existence?

Lionel threw back the door and turned to Leon who was at the step.

"He is in there," said the elder of the Three Captains. "Look in and see the man who came back with the so-called Blasted Hand to wreak vengeance on us for the scars of the old thrashing."

Leon went in and looked.

"Bring in a light here. Ho! I have a match!" he cried, and lighting a lucifer, he held it above his head threw its light throughout the cramped room.

In one corner half crouched the figure of a man. The eyes were deep set and stareful and the hands were round the knees.

"Your victim is dead."

"No, that can't be. He hasn't been here long enough to perish for he was strong and defiant when we shut him up."

"He is dead, I say."

Leon was holding the match close to Sol's face, and the eyes did not blink nor the hands move.

The Three King-pins stood round the spectacle, and looked on with speechless mien.

Leo stooped and removed one of the hands and the head fell forward another inch.

"Dead he is!" cried Lionel. "Do you want to see the old scars?"

Leon nodded and the other King-pin removed the shirt where it concealed the shoulders, and Leon looked at the welts there.

"Lock him up again," he said, drawing back.

"Let him remain here till the day of judgment!"

They passed out and Lionel relocked and resealed the door of the Blasted Hand's tomb.

"Now, what next?" asked Leo. "You were about to descend to the mine and our treasure house when we came in. Were you really going back to the trail?"

"I am going back to it. I know where to look for him. I wormed from the next victim of the Triad the secret which he almost threw into the faces of the boys at the Green Paradise. Are you sure of the pards now?"

"Sure of them?" cried the two in a breath. "There isn't a man in Crossbar who would not die for the Triad."

"The story he told them was calculated to stir the blood of the toughest. There is in the hearts of all men sympathy which can be reached sometimes."

"But not as against us!" cried Lionel. "Not as against us, I say."

"Then, I can leave you here in charge of the Triad Court. You will see that the man in the toils does not escape its wrath and that the seed he sowed to-day falls on the barren grounds of the human heart."

"You must stay! You must not quit us at this stage of the game. The last session of the Triad shall be held by its three judges. You shall go back to the trail, but not now."

The hand of Lionel threw down the trap-door and Leon colored as the opening closed.

"Long before sunset you shall ride forth in the face of all after Salome's son. Nay, we will go with you and be three avengers as of old. We will be a trio of vultures and the young dove shall feel the same talons that found his mother and bore her to the desert. Leon, this is the last session of the court we instituted. We must close it together."

"Very well," was the reply. "But remember! I ride back to the trail before sunset."

"Ay, brother, we will ride together!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FUSE BURNS.

In one of the shanties of Crossbar while the three brothers of lawless vengeance were together in the house of the Triad, sat a man whose cares of office did not sit easily on his mind.

This was Derringer Dick, Dagon's successor, and he had taken possession of the cabin occupied by his forerunner some time before.

We have seen how he wanted to resign when he announced to the King-pins that some one had stolen Dagon's head and since then he had been troubled with a fear that such was to be his own end.

Dick was quite alone and the coming session of the Triad Court was uppermost in his mind.

But there was one thing that alleviated his distress of mind and that was the promise made by Lionel that the court was about to terminate

its official career, after which he would be relieved of the duties of his position.

Dagon was a man well calculated to be sheriff of Crossbar and Derringer Dick had made several discoveries concerning him since taking possession of his shanty.

On this occasion he had taken another look through the place, tearing up the floor in his search, under the belief that Dagon had accumulated something during his official life, and all at once he drew from beneath a board in one corner of the place a small box well banded with iron straps which Dagon had fashioned during his spare moments.

This was the bonanza Derringer Dick sought. He carried the box to the table and after making sure that he was not observed, he broke the straps with a camp hatchet and tumbled out on the table the contents of the box.

But nothing rattled or clinked like money. There was no sound of gold or silver, and instead of shining metal, he saw a heap of moldy papers which were scrawled over by some rude hand.

Dick was disappointed, but went to work on the papers and in a little while was reading one with wide open eyes and interested mien.

It was a strange story, so strange that to have found it there lent an additional charm to the narration, and Dick read on and on, never looking up to catch breath nor to note whether he was seen or not.

"Great Jehosaphat! who would have thought of this?" said he. "This must have been Dagon's work, but I never thought he knew all this stuff. He has left behind, what for Heaven only knows, the full history of the Three Captains. Here is a wild story about a woman riding to her death across the desert, and dying just like the painting on the wall in the Triad House."

Derringer Dick was one of the few men of Crossbar who had seen the hidden painting, and he had seen it more than once without knowing what it meant.

He tackled the paper again and read to the end of it.

"What if the camp knew this!" he said to himself. "What if the boys knew what the captains have been? We have been slaves long enough, I think, and I don't like my position one bit! What if I am to be shot down as Dagon was and then lose my head afterward? There is enough for all of us. The mines aren't half-worked and the Three Captains are the ones who are raking in the dust. We are slaves, I say. We are the men who serve for what we eat and drink. They rule us with an iron hand and God knows I didn't ask to be made sheriff of Crossbar."

It was a terrible temptation to a man like Derringer Dick.

He held liberty and fortune in his hand; he held there the story which Dagon, who knew so much, had kept during his life in the camp, and at last had transferred to paper to hide it under the house some time before losing life and head.

"It's the only chance we'll ever have to break the chain," said the high sheriff, continuing. "What time is it? Where is the sun?"

He sought the position of the sun in the heavens and turned back to the find on the table.

The best preserved of the papers he thrust in his bosom.

"I haven't got much time," he muttered. "What I do must be done at once and I mustn't miss any man."

He went out with a wildly beating heart beneath his shirt. He glanced toward the Triad House as if his secret was half-betrayed and made his way down the street to another shanty near the end of the line.

Three men were there and seeing one who stood against the wall, Dick was falling back when he was spoken to by the others.

"You need not run, Dagon's successor. We are friends and we have just been discussing the strange story Captain Jason told us in the Green Paradise."

Dick's heart went into his throat and he shut the door.

"I have something for you to look at, but swear that you will not betray me whether you act or not. Remember! I am high sheriff of Crossbar."

The three raised their right hands and swore to keep any secret Derringer Dick might see fit to impart.

Then he took the papers from his bosom. He gathered the pards at the table and spread out for their eyes the old papers which his curiosity had brought to light.

With bulging eyes the trio read everything.

"This is confirmation!" said one. "This confirms the wildest part of Silk Ribbon Sam's story. It must be true."

"It is the voice of one dead!" cried Dick. "It is a voice from the grave of the headless sheriff."

A silence fell round the bronzed group and for a full second it was not broken.

Man looked at man and into the eyes of each came a light which had not been there before.

"Have you seen the picture?" asked the sheriff.

"What picture?"

"The one on the wall beyond the Triad's door?—the one that portrays the death scene in the desert."

"We have never seen it."

"Well, it is there. The Three Captains have had painted there the scene of the woman dying in the desert. It covers the whole wall."

"The fiends!"

"The devils incarnate!"

A satisfied smile was playing with Derringer Dick's lips.

"I have seen it. I have lifted the curtain and gazed at the terrible scene till I felt my flesh creeping over my bones and my blood running like icy streams through my veins."

"The three Satans! And these are the men we have been serving."

"We are under the thumbs of the three men who have made Crossbar their hiding-place and their kingdom. We are known to the world beyond the hills as the slaves of the Three King-pins. When they growl we show our teeth; when they purr, we smile. It is a life of shame; and now that there is something in the story of the man, no matter who he is or what brought him to Crossbar, we are bound to take some notice of the crime of crimes."

Once more they looked at one another.

They needed a leader; but who would offer himself? Who would take the initiative against the three powerful captains of the mountain camp?

"The court will sit in a few hours," said Dick. "I shall be on duty there, and Heaven knows I don't want to serve in the dooming of the man who came to avenge the death on the desert. That man's vengeance is just. He is on a trail which has the sanction of Heaven. We are yet the slaves of Crossbar. We dare not move against the fiends nor lift our fingers in behalf of the victim in the net. And what if the woman's child is alive? What if that child is Irma, or Oscar, the exile? They will hunt the child down with the same vengeance which overtook the mother. Heavens! I wish we were men."

In the silence that followed Dick's ejaculation the three seemed to hear the beatings of their own hearts.

"Since we are cowards, we must prepare to see the great triumph of the Three Captains," continued Dick. "I will go to my post of duty. I will go and stand by while the court sits and carries out its mandates on Silk Ribbon Sam. And you will help me carry out the last commands of the Triad."

"Never! They shall not be carried out!" and a hand came down upon the table with the force of a trip-hammer.

The others breathed freer. That was the beginning of the mutiny.

"Never!" echoed Derringer Dick, and the word was taken up by the others until it had been spoken by every one.

Then they put their heads together once more and the cabal grew in invention.

"We have an hour yet," said Dick. "The court will sit at two o'clock and I shall be there."

One hour!

"We may fail and if we do—"

"We must not fail! To miss the mark is to die like dogs before the Triad bar. We know the men we have served. We know that those whose hands have ruled us with a rod of iron will not hesitate to kill without mercy."

"The camp must rise against them. With two-thirds of Crossbar on our side, success will not be assured. We must have all or none."

"All or none!"

Ten minutes later Derringer Dick walked from the shanty and went back to his own.

He was the possessor of a terrible secret, but he was not its only holder. It was shared by three more, but in time it would be known to others.

What if there was a traitor or so in Crossbar? What if the mutiny should be intrusted to some faithless friend? That would mean much. It would mean death swift and sure, and the triumph of the Triad Court would be the grandest one in its history.

Thus was it true, as Irma told Oscar, that a volcano slumbered under the camp.

But the girl did not know one-half the truth; she only guessed at some of it, but some was in her keeping, and she was sure the next hour would witness the last play of the avenger.

Derringer Dick, acting under the last instructions between the heads of the conspiracy, went to the Green Paradise, and stood alongside of the bar.

The hour was near at hand. The clock that ticked away behind the bar showed him that in a few minutes he would be asked to open the Court of the Triad.

He looked over the crowd which had gathered around him. He tried to read the faces of all, but his fears half unmasked him, for he had to keep before him the dread fear of failure.

He poured out a glass of the hot liquor of the

camp and felt it scorch his throat without affording any strength to his nerves.

"I shall show the white feather at the last moment," he said to himself. "I will lose my head, like Dagon did, but at the command of the Triad Court. Why was I fool enough to set this work on foot?"

All at once he heard a voice at the door, and he saw there the well-dressed figure of Lionel as he stepped into the place with his eye in search of some one.

"Captain Dick, you are wanted!" said the King-pin.

The limbs of the high sheriff trembled as he walked toward the door.

"It has failed," he thought. "Everything is as quiet as the tomb. We are cowards all and still the slaves of the Three Captains of Crossbar!"

Out in the light where the unclouded sun beat upon the Plaza stood a group of men looking at something seen coming down the trail toward the mountain.

Derringer Dick looked, too.

A man was advancing down the street and Lionel had paused and was looking in the same direction.

"Open court!" he cried, turning to Dick. "Sheriff, the hour has come and you will proclaim the convening of the Court of the Triad."

Dick stammered and tried twice before he spoke. He felt that all was known, that the conspiracy had been betrayed, and already at his throat something cold like the blade of a knife was felt where men's heads are severed.

"Look! I know him now!" cried out a man. "That man yonder is Mountain Morg, the person whom the truce released."

It was true. Back to camp, erect and with the coolness of the ideal desperado, had come the friend and ally of Silk Ribbon Sam, the detective, doomed by the Triad Court.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT BAY.

MOUNTAIN MORG came down the street looking at the crowd on the Plaza but caring not for the scrutiny to which he was subjecting himself.

The Piute Pansy had returned unexpectedly to the pards of Crossbar, and they regarded him in the light of an interloper who was apt to interfere in the proceedings.

He looked toward the shanty occupied by Silk Ribbon Sam and all at once turned toward the door and advanced in that direction.

"Stop that man!" cried the voice of Leon. "He must not have an interview with the prisoner before trial."

Derringer Dick looked at the men with whom he had talked an hour previous, but they showed no signs of playing the hand they had laid down.

Mountain Morg heard the stern voice of the King-pin and stopped of his own accord.

In another moment he had turned on Leon and was coming forward.

They stood face to face on the Plaza of Crossbar and looking at one another were the observed of all as they seemed eager to come together. Perhaps the failure of Leon on the trail rankled in the King-pin's heart and that when he saw the cause of it his blood got hot and he sought a meeting.

"Pshaw!" suddenly cried Mountain Morg. "I will see the court by and by. I have business just now with Captain Jason," and in another moment he was walking back.

The men of Crossbar looked at their leader. They saw the light that had leaped up in the eyes of Leon and he came forward, his hand covering the figure of the Piute Pansy and his whole soul as it were in a flame.

"We will see! Open the court, sheriff!"

Derringer Dick stepped forward and his voice found utterance.

"Ho, ye! the Court of the Triad is now open for business. Attend ye all and come forward and remain until the court is dismissed. Long live the liberties of Crossbar."

"There are no liberties in Crossbar."

These words from twenty throats caused Leon to turn in the direction from whence they came and he saw a group of men, one of whom was undoubtedly their leader.

They stood in their dark shirts clutching their revolvers and looking at him as his lips twitched in anger and the soft silk hands closed at his sides.

Leon was white.

This was the first breath of mutiny in Crossbar. It was the bursting of the bomb and for some time the man stood perplexed, even thunderstruck.

Rebellion in the camp they had established and ruled with a rod of iron!

It seemed impossible, yet the determined visages he saw should have convinced him that the reign of the three mountain czars was near its end and that the revolver of the mutineer was cocked.

"Open court!" he roared, turning again to Derringer Dick, but that worthy did not move nor open his mouth.

Leon saw it all now. He seemed to see the depths of the conspiracy, and with his face showing the full feelings that actuated him,

he looked over the crowd and threw out his hands:

"Vermin!" he cried, in derisive tones. "We have made you what you are—free men of the mountains, and you have turned on the hands that give you life and food. You have turned on your betters and from the freedom of the gold camp—from the pleasures of Crossbar—you have gone over to the foe. Take what comes! Take what follows the traitor's deed and don't squeal."

He turned to the House of the Triad and not a man molested him. His very bearing seemed to have appalled the cabal, and they looked at one another as he walked away, crossing the Plaza until he reached the door when he turned once more and looked over his shoulder.

Then they seemed to realize that the man they wanted was escaping; then they saw that their captain had awed them by the look and voice which they had served for years, and when the leader of the mutiny cried out that it would be dangerous to let Leon rejoin the others there was a sudden movement toward the castle.

But they stopped midway for the door of the house opened and in it appeared Lionel with his face as white and cool as Leon's and his tall form visible to all.

"This is treason and you will take what comes!" cried he. "We ask no mercy in this battle, but woe to Crossbar and its traitors!"

The crowd halted. It drew back and looked at the man in the door, and for a second seemed to be awed by his presence.

Silk Ribbon Sam and Mountain Morg had been witnesses to these events. From the shanty they had seen the outbreak of the mutiny and were gazing at the house where they knew the men of the Triad had taken refuge preparatory to fighting the last battle for self-preservation.

It had to come.

For some time nothing transpired in Crossbar. The sun sinking toward the western horizon threw its beams upon the dark ground and made it darker still with shadow.

The pards of Crossbar had gone back in part to the Green Paradise and were in consultation there. They realized that the crisis had come; that it had to be met, for after the initiative the contest could not recede without a struggle to the bitter end and that within the confines of the camp.

Meantime the Three Captains in the House of the Triad stood face to face in the room of the picture.

They were cool and self-possessed.

Leon leaning against the wall with his arms folded on his chest was listening to Lionel who was talking.

The curtain that protected the painting was up and the desert scene was open to them. It seemed to have received new touches of the brush within the last few hours, and if one had noted it closely he would have seen hovering over the figures of the woman and her dying steed a form ghostly and weird in outline which looked like the hovering spirit of doom.

The brush had been there. Yes, the brush of Lionel the bandit painter had placed on the dreadful canvas something which had not been there before. The paint was hardly dry on the picture and the winged Nemesis which he had transferred to the canvas was seen by Leo and Leon, and they had admired his work, telling him through clinched teeth that he had painted well.

"The time has come at last," said Leon. "We have reached the end of the play. There is open mutiny in Crossbar and the traitors will coalesce with the detective and we will have to fight it out with them."

"And if we lose we will ride back over the old ground and they will not leave us until, turned out on the desert, we will see death in a thousand wings and hear it in the wild howls of the famished packs."

"You are right, brother. Then will some artist with a living brush transfer to yonder wall a companion picture, but this time there will be three horses and as many riders. Do you doubt for a moment the form Silk Ribbon's vengeance will take?"

"No!" cried Lionel. "I know what it will be and that we will look down upon the hot sand from the backs of our steeds. It will be the delayed vengeance of years. We might have crushed out this rebellion, but after the men heard the tale of death on the desert—after they had listened to the story told at the Green Paradise by this cool head whose oath was heard by Salome ere she died, we were in for it."

Leo smiled and looked up from the chair which he filled at the head of the table.

There was no fear on the face of the younger King-pin.

As handsome as ever with his hat set back and his full white forehead seen in the light of the sun as it streamed into the room filling it with golden glory, he was the handsomest of the cool trio and his figure was a sight as it was seen by the others.

"Let it come!" he cried. "Why shouldn't we have our darkness and the man out there his triumph?"

"But that is not human. It is against us!" said Lionel.

"Ah!" cried Leo. "You still have hopes of capturing the fair Irma, have you?"

Lionel flushed crimson.

"Never mind. You came between me and the Seraph of the camp," he exclaimed. "You made her promise that she would not entertain my love-making. You came between, I say."

"What is this?" and the hand of Leon was thrown forward and Lionel was pushed back as he was advancing upon Leo who did not move, but sat, still smiling at his rage. "Are you quarreling over a woman in the shadow of death? Come, fools! This is not the time or place for quarrels. We must meet the enemy. He is at the door."

"Let him have out his rage!" smiled Leo. "I haven't seen my brother in love for years. I haven't looked upon his fine black eyes flashing as they flash now since we let the steed go across the desert as the picture shows us. Let him come on, brother Leon."

Lionel was flung across the room and the half-drawn revolver fell from his hand and lay at the foot of the table.

"Shame! Be men! The foe is here! We have but to turn back and administer to the fools of rebels of Crossbar the punishment they deserve."

Lionel stooped and picked up the weapon and with his face suddenly white he wheeled upon Leo and covered him with it.

"Stand up against yon wall and let me add a richer coloring to your picture. Let me fleck the painted sands with your blood!"

The figure of the younger King-pin rose and he stood against the huge painting, looking for all the world like one planted in the foreground of the waste and with grated teeth Lionel covered him.

Leon stood spell-bound.

"You will save me the ride across the desert," he said, looking calmly into the eyes of his brother. "You will save me the thirst and the coppery sky—the vultures and the wolves. Let your aim be true. I am ready to fall where your brush immortalized the one dark spot in our lives."

The revolver dropped and Lionel threw it upon the table.

"Coward!" hissed Leo. "You haven't the courage of a boy, brother. I laugh at your nerve, but perhaps you are saving it for the supreme moment."

There was no response and the hand of Leon pulled down the curtain and the painting was hidden once more.

All at once they seemed to hear a sound which drew them toward the door and the hand of Lionel caught the latch.

"Shall it be fight here or shall we walk out and die like gentlemen?"

"Let it be here."

It was Leon who spoke.

"Then, first let us look at the picture again. Come, gentlemen."

He turned and threw up the curtain.

It caught on a brass hook at the top of the painting and they moved to the further side of the chamber and with folded arms straightened along the wall and looked at Lionel's work.

Not a muscle moved as they stood there, their right hands wound about the butts of their revolvers.

Leo was the first to speak.

"She deserved it all!" he said.

"Ay, a thousand deaths like that would not have wiped out the shame of the broken vow. We may never find the child she left, but we will have the satisfaction of dying where we have left the memorial of her last hours."

"Down with the murderers of the desert!"

The cry came clear and distinct to the Three Captains of Crossbar.

They looked at one another and Lionel stepped across the room.

"Here! swear to die with me like brothers and gentlemen," he cried lifting his hand.

"We swear!"

"Swear to go across the divide like the Three Captains of Crossbar should go."

"We will go side by side, and the avenger shall have three dead men for all his pains."

"Down with the Three King-pins of the mountain! Death to the slayers of women and the torturers of sisters!"

The mob seemed at the very door. The avengers appeared to be on the steps of the House of the Triad and Lionel with a grim smile at his mouth, opened the portal.

At his heels stood the others and on their faces was the look of the cornered cool-head.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

OVER THE OLD DESERT.

In front of the Triad House stood the cool mob of Crossbar.

The toughest men have the tenderest hearts. Men who have lived all their lives amid scenes of crime and cunning sometimes can be reached quickest by a story of wrong and suffering.

It was true of the narrative spun by Silk Ribbon Sam in the Green Paradise; the story he had kept back for the supreme moment had had its effect, and the mob at the door of the Triad

Court was as determined on revenge as ever it was in serving the Three Captains of Crossbar.

It was the supreme moment when Lionel opened the door.

The three brothers felt that the crisis had come and they were not mistaken. They knew the temper of the men they had made their slaves; they knew that the chains of servitude had been broken and that they were no longer the serfs of the mountain stronghold.

All at once the forms of the three were seen in the doorway and when they looked over the crowd and saw there faces which they had seen before, but under different circumstances, they seemed to smile again.

"What is it, men of Crossbar?" quietly asked Lionel.

The crowd seemed to shrink from the cool look of the man who stood on the threshold of the Triad House.

Suddenly a voice not louder than a child's came from the center of the band.

"Down with the men of the desert!"

It was the starting point of the mob; it gained volume as it was taken up by the others and in a moment the cry for blood was the only one heard in Crossbar.

"Where is the man who brought all this about? Where is the detective-avenger?"

At that moment the figure of Silk Ribbon Sam came forward and the three brothers saw him in the sunlight looking at them with the triumph of a true trailer lighting up his face.

"You have tracked and found," said Lionel, turning to the Nemesis. "You have tried to carry out the oath you took to the woman who perished on the desert. You have trailed us for years, but at last you have closed in. We might have finished you before, but we forbore. We had you in the net of the Triad, but we spared you. You shall go back—back to the grave of the breaker of her vow and tell the spirit that haunts the spot that you have finished the hunt. Men of Crossbar, the new masters you have found will be as exacting as those you have thrown aside. You will not find them the Triad Brothers, and when you have served them awhile you will long again for the old fleshpots of Crossbar."

A dead silence followed this brief harangue, and then the figure of Mountain Morg, the Piute Pansy, presented itself in full view of all.

"There are trails on the desert which need rediscovery. There is a spot where the cacti will not grow and where the serpent scorches as he drags himself along. Captains of Crossbar, you shall find that spot, and may the heavens refuse you their pity as they gave it in profusion to Salome, the hunted sister."

Again the wild cry for blood broke forth and the crowd surged toward the house.

All at once there came from a cabin in full view of this startling scene a youth who looked upon it with white face and quivering lips.

He was accompanied by a young girl who held his hands in hers and who, while she glanced toward the mob, looked now and then at him, as if she would read the innermost thoughts that flitted through his mind.

"The crisis is here," said Irma. "They have cornered the three tigers and there is no escape." Oscar did not speak.

"They will make sure of their prey and Silk Ribbon Sam will see that over the sands which your mother traveled with parched lip and glaring eye, ride the merciless brothers of the Southwest. Then will Salome have been avenged; then will the flowers bloom again on her grave, for, as she told Silk Ribbon, they will not come forth there until the blood of the three brothers shall have flecked the white sands of the desert."

"Look! They are advancing on the house. The Triad King-pins stand like men of iron in the door. They will die with their boots on and the ride will never be taken. I must go and help them!"

"No!" cried Irma. "Your place is here. They can't know that you have returned from exile. Let them die believing that you are still a wanderer on the mountain, harassed by the wolf and hunted, perhaps, by the rattlesnake."

"No! no!"

Oscar broke from the girl's grasp and sprung toward the House of the Triad.

His figure was seen by the men in the doorway and Leon, uttering a cry, seemed to quit the house; but the hand of Lionel drew him back again.

"It is he!" cried Leon. "It is the son of Salome!"

"Let him go!" hoarsely shouted Lionel. "The time for death has come!" and he forced Leon back into the house and shut the door in the teeth of the human tigers of Crossbar.

This action was greeted by a yell which reached the uttermost part of the camp.

The enraged men of Crossbar made a rush for the house and their feet gained the steps.

"No deaths, remember!" said a voice above the confusion. "These men are to ride over the same sand that caught the blood of the woman called Salome."

These words seemed to have no effect. The door was reached and hands of iron seized

the latch, but it would not move at their bidding.

Derringer Dick, the high sheriff, was cool now that he had the whole camp at his back. He headed the mob, and when he drew off showing his burly figure to all as he braced it for the leap against the portal, silence fell over all and they waited for the result of the attack.

Against the caken portal like a catapult went the high sheriff.

The stout door quivered and then shouts of vengeance once more cut the air.

Once more Derringer Dick drew off and prepared for another spring.

His figure was in midair when a bullet crashed through the door and, stopping suddenly near the portal the form of Dick fell back, and dropped in a heap on the step, where it lay with eyes that stared up at the sky in their agony.

Fifty men seemed to reach the door together now.

Dark shirts and darker faces mingled in confusion on the threshold of what had been to many of them a forbidden house. They tore down the door as though it had been a portal of pine; they rent it in twain with the fury of wolves, and in another moment all had poured into the house and were looking everywhere for the men of Crossbar.

"To the room of the death scene!" cried a voice, and the figure of Silk Ribbon Sam led the way.

The door opened at his touch and he sprung into the room.

It was empty!

But the curtain of the painting was thrown up and the scene upon which many now looked for the first time was visible with the western sunshine upon it, and in the breast of Salome painted beside her steed, were buried three knives which had been driven deep into the wall by the hands of the Three King-pins.

All at once one discovered the door across the room and it was broken down, but all shrunk in terror from the scene that greeted them beyond the step.

In the corner where we saw him last, with his staring eyes and his hollow cheeks, sat the man of the hyena trail—Sol Solstice who did not get to avenge the old whipping on the desert.

The mob looked awhile, for the face of the Blasted Hand was wonderfully preserved, and then fell back as the voice of their leader called them to the work ahead.

In another moment the room held nothing but its ghastly tenant and the avengers were rushing down the narrow corridor underground.

On, on through the darkness which they now and then dissipated with their torches and at last all halted, for before them, backed by a wall of stone, stood the three pards of Crossbar.

It was a sudden halt by the mob, a breathing-spell in the face of the enemy and then a rush with a yell of vengeance!

The sun is rising on a desert which reaches apparently from horizon to horizon.

The clumps of cacti that stand here and there throw a meager shadow, and though the day is newly born, the air is like a furnace and the sky without a cloud.

There are three dark specks on the waste and they move slowly westward with the rising sun.

All through the night these objects, three horses and their Mazeppa riders, have been wandering over that open waste, with now and then the faintest breeze on their faces and the long howl of the wolf in their ears.

Now that the day has come again, the black wings of the ever greedy vulture are seen in the sky, and the circles as they contract grow more and more portentive of doom.

Noon comes and the sun glows like a furnace. Everything containing life feels in its veins the red fire of the cloudless god.

Not a drop of water save in a delusive mirage is seen by the bloodshot eyes of the three fated riders and looking at one another they grate their teeth and move on in silence.

The steeds stagger at last and fall; the wings of the king of the desert sky swoop lower and lower; they shade the men on the sand; they squat on the haunches of the dying steeds and look with eyes that burn and beaks that are ready to tear the vitals of men hardly dead.

It is the end of the Three Czars of Crossbar.

The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind the grist of vengeance and in time all is ground.

The three on the desert are watched, but at a distance, by a lot of horsemen who do not approach until the birds have begun their horrid feast.

Then they swoop down upon the scene and frighten off the black scourges for a time. The riders go back and wait another hour.

When they gallop forward once more it is to lean from their saddles and look at the faces burnt by the sun.

They exchange smiles and the captain of the band raises his right hand.

"Back to Crossbar!" he says. "The painting shall have a companion in the House of the Triad. It shall have one depicting the ven-

geance long delayed, but none the less terrible and just.

We are in Crossbar once more.

The camp looks the same, but in one part of it just across the Plaza a house seems on the verge of ruin, and the door which swings on un-oiled hinges stands wide for any visitor.

A man enters and proceeds to a certain room where he pauses and turns to one of the walls.

A painting is there, but the curtain which once concealed it has fallen to the floor.

Behind him is another painting of three men dying, lashed to their steeds on a desert.

The looker-on smiles and then turns from the house.

"This is the day for the wedding!" he said. "I shall never again look upon the scene. It is too horrible!"

He quit the place and crossed the Plaza.

Evening falls as softly as of yore.

A young couple, both handsome and lovable, stand in the middle of the Plaza.

The men of Crossbar form a circle around them and it is noticed that the toughs of the mountain camp wear their best, though not a "biled shirt" is visible.

The parson brought from an adjoining camp for the purpose, repeats the words that unite the young pair for life, and at the conclusion of the ceremony Silk Ribbon Sam steps forward and presents the groom with a paper at which he glances and smiles.

The paper is an inventory of the estate of the Three Captains of Crossbar, and the young man who is their heir, knows that he is the richest bonanza lord in the wild West.

Time passes.

There are bones on the desert and the vultures sit on the heap and whet their beaks for future feasts.

But far away two souls are happy, and around them has grown a new camp with few of the faults of the old, and the House of the Triad has given place to a new home where the ruling spirits are not the trio of sister-hunters.

No death-painting decorates the walls and the man who stands in the door and holds in his arms a child, looks across the Plaza and catches sight of Mountain Morg as he comes down the street waving his hat to the little one.

The man with the child is Silk Ribbon Sam, the Nemesis shadow, and the babe is the grand-child of Salome.

THE END.

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